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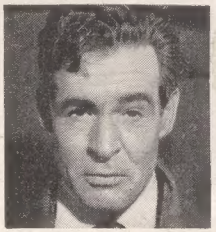

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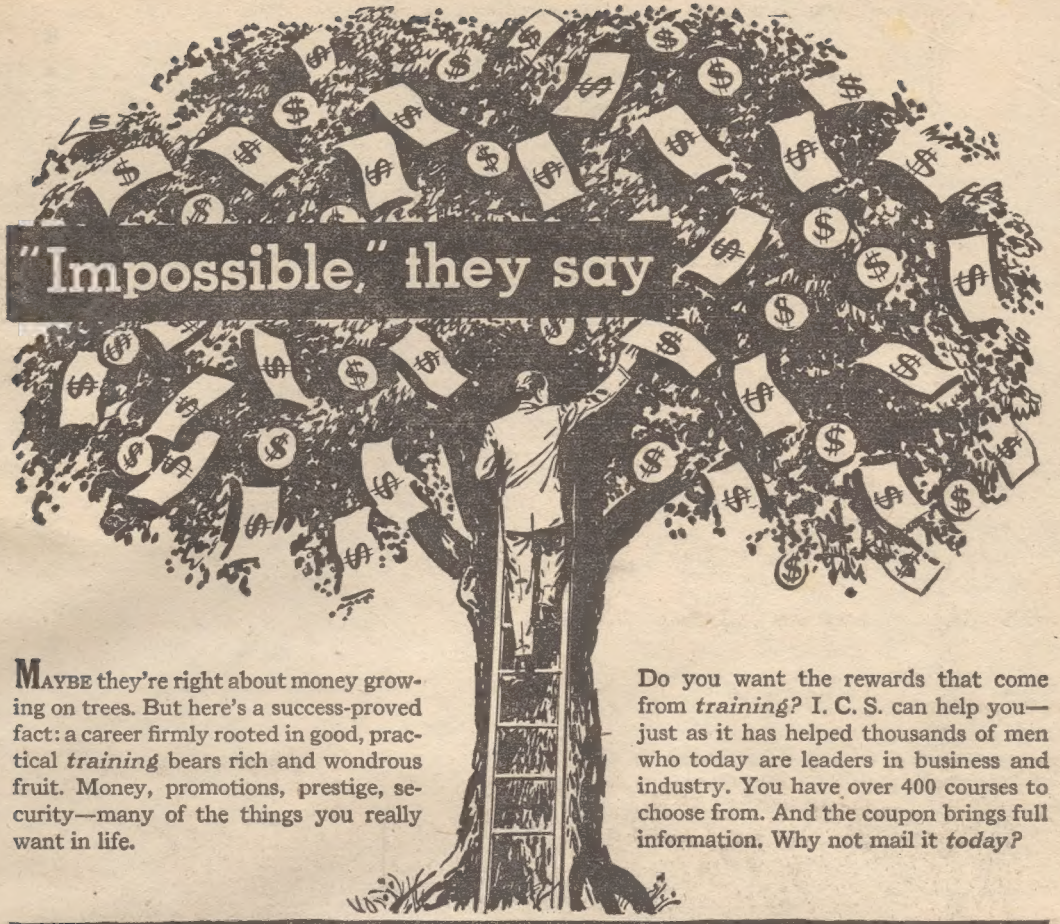

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TEXAS RANGERS

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VOL. 45, No. 2 JANUARY, 1952

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

LOBO COLONEL.....Jackson Cole 10
When the fighting Texas Ranger must reform or arrest a friend, he faces his greatest challenge!

An Action Novelet

I RIDE ALONE.....H. A. DeRosso 78
Despite himself, Swanee rode as a hired range killer

Short Stories

STABLE BOY.....Lewis B. Patten 60
Dick was in terror of violence—but forgot his fears
CATCH YOUR KILLER.....Fred Grove 68
Charlie Big Sick couldn't help hooking a likely fish
THE SAGA OF WISPY WILLIE.....Tex Mumford 94
He was the whirling wizard of music—piano or gun!
THE FINAL ROUNDUP.....William Hopson 104
An old-time lawman is confronted with modern crooks

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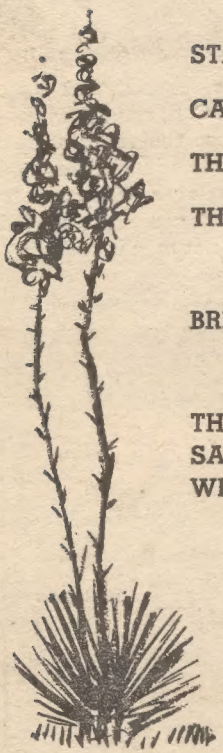
BRIMSTONE ON THE BRAZOS.....Cibolo Ford 100
It happened while two fire-eaters staged their duel

Features

THE FRONTIER POST.....Captain Starr 6
SAGEBRUSH SAVVY.....S. Omar Barker 9
WESTERNETTES.....Harold Helfer 93

Also See Other Features on Pages 29, 39 and 53

SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*



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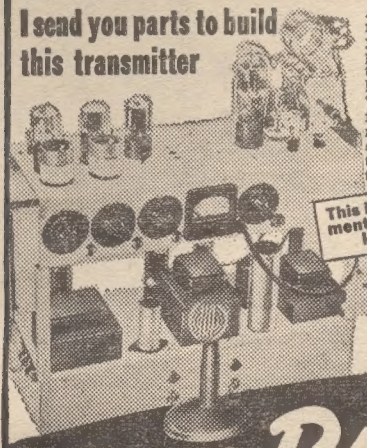

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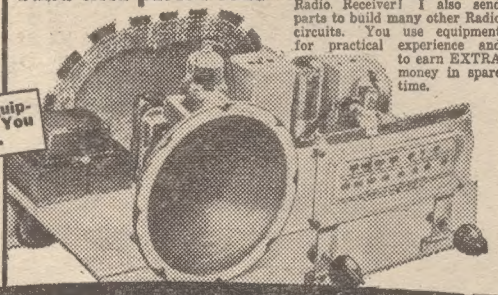

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Bait-Ranching Is Big Business!

THE newest thing from Texas west is the bait ranch. Raising fish bait is getting to be big business. There's good money in it. I crossed trails with one worm herder who is making a $4,000 a year turnover, I'm told. He raises mealy worms by the millions and distributes them over a regular route, like a milkman.

Mealy worms are not the only product of the bait ranchers. Pickled crickets and grasshoppers, live angleworms and night crawlers, crawfish and minnows, both live and preserved, smelly catfish bait of several kinds and an article known as the sardinette are going strong.

Selling fishworms isn't new, of course. Small boys all over the country have been doing it for years for bicycle money. But the mealy worm has hit the high brackets. A few backyard flatboxes can pay off the family mortgage.

They're Called Li-cuts

The mealy worm's trade name is li-cut. Who named them that, I can't find out. Li-cuts are bred, raised and sold in bran and distributed to the bait dealers in one pint cardboard containers. To supply the critters with needed moisture, a small piece of cactus is enclosed. A piece about the size of the end of your thumb is enough. It's cut from a leaf of spineless cactus. Don't try to tone up your li-cuts with a hunk of ordinary cactus, as I did once, and get your fingers full of stickers every time you reach for a fresh bait.

The li-cut, in its bait stage, is a small, gray wiggler about twice the size of a maggot, or about three-eighths of an inch long. It's life cycle goes from larva to worm, then to the cocoon stage from which it hatches as a small, dark beetle. It's easy to handle and goes on a hook with less fuss than a slippery garden worm. Trout, bluegills, crappie and small bass are mighty fond of li-cuts.

The real name of this little newcomer to the angling world is Tenebria molitor. It propagates fast in warm weather but if the cardboard container is kept moderately cool they remain in the wiggle or worm stage up to two weeks before they turn into beetles.

Watching worms grow and make you rich is my idea of a pleasant occupation. There's a little more than that to bait ranching though. Big shots in the business supply dealers over a large territory, often travelling 1000 miles a week and more, in fishing season. During closed season, they drum up trade and find new customers among tackle shops and fishing resorts. Then, too, there's the hard work of lugging your money to the bank every few days.

Cricket Plagues

A plague of crickets is bad news for the farmer but very good news among the bait-getters. They rush to the scene and scoop up sacksful with shovels. The pickling process is pretty much of a secret among the fraternity, and I'm not in on it. Grasshoppers are put up in pretty much the same way, I understand. I see no reason why big, fat locusts can't be preserved too. But did you ever have any luck on locust bait? I haven't. Once I took a big and hard-to-get trout on a butterfly. But that was just a break, I reckon.

New, profitable baits will be originated as time goes on, that's a certainty. But pioneering isn't the way to quick, easy money in bait ranching. I heard of a bright young gallus who started raising hop-frogs. His enterprise failed. Frogs made wonderful bass bait but the trouble was keeping the froggies alive from frog-farm to ultimate consumer. Also, some dealers kicked when frogs got loose in their stores, hiding under counters and showcases and croaking for days—until they "croaked" to croak no more.

Similar drawbacks keep mice from being

exploited commercially as bait, although any bass fisherman will tell you there's nothing like a live mouse to fetch a big, wise old bass out of his hiding place.

The modus operandi in mousing for bass is to hook the mouse lightly through the scruff of the neck and set him afloat downwind on a shingle or chip of wood. When he reaches the lurking spot of the big bass, a light jerk of the rod dislodges Mister Mouse from his raft. Mousie's first swim is generally his last.

They tell me that there's a hidden slough on the Texas gulf coast where the bass grow so big that fishermen use yearling calves instead of mice for bait. They float the calf by pulling an old inner tube around it. Beef and veal prices being what they are, that's millionaire sport, naturally. Also, it's a heap harder to catch the calf than to catch the bass, and there aren't many millionaires, even in Texas, who are good enough at that sort of thing. How big are the bass? Shucks, I plumb forgot to ask!

Sturgeon Bait

A few years ago I came onto a man fishing for sturgeon in the Snake River in Idaho. I asked him what was the best bait and he said a horse, as the sturgeon were running to pretty fair size just then.

He said that one horse on a hook was usually enough, though a cluster bait was better for the big ones, he thought.

I asked him if he ever used a horse for bait and he said yes, he did, in a way, only the week before. He told me he hitched a big old work horse onto his throwline to pull out a hard-fighting sturgeon but darned if the fish didn't pull the horse in the river instead.

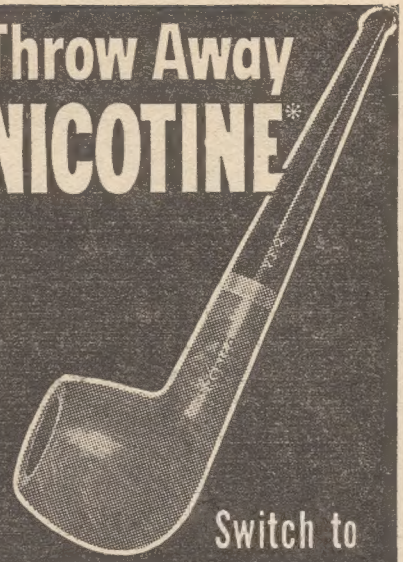
"I never did see that horse again, so the sturgeon must o' got it," he said. "That's how I know horses make good sturgeon bait."

Me, I didn't mess around with the Snake River sturgeon fishing because I didn't feel up to lugging around a baitbox full of horses.

Maybe you think that's just another tall Texan yarn, but hold on till you hear about a Texas rancher named Grady Carothers, who has a spread near Goodthwaite, where he raises reindeer. Imagine that, raising reindeer in Texas!

What Carothers does is to trap reindeer in Alaska, on a government permit, and ship them by plane to Texas where he trains and breaks 'em for the Santa Claus snow sleigh trade. And that's an honest-to-goodness fact.

Throw Away NICOTINE*



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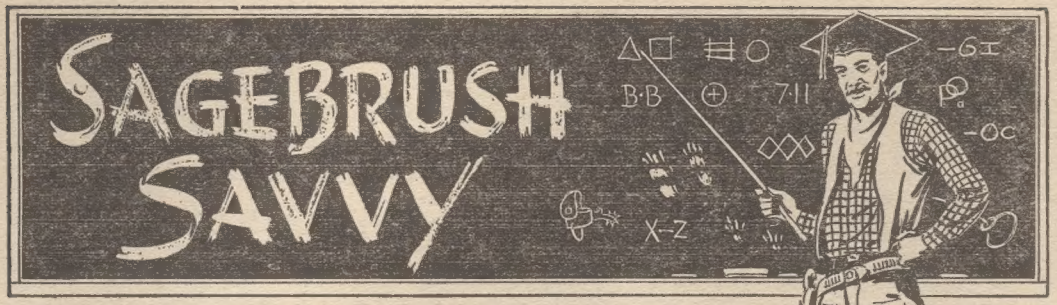


A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—In rodeos, which is more dangerous, the bronc riding contest or the Brahma bull riding? —Jack D. (Wis.)

A.—While there are no compiled statistics on the subject, I believe rodeo records of recent years would show more cowboys killed or seriously injured in Brahma bull riding than in any other rodeo event, and more of these by getting trampled after being thrown than in any other way.

Q.—Just what kind of a hat is a *sombrero*? —R.H.L. (Miss.)

A.—*Sombrero* (sohm-BRAY-ro) is actually just the Spanish word for hat, but as adopted into Western cowboy lingo it has more or less generally come to mean either a big Mexican hat or a "ten gallon" cowboy hat.

Q.—Do Forest Rangers carry sixshooters?—G.H.H. (N.Y.)

A.—They may or not, as they please, but since a Forest Ranger's duties are mostly of an administrative rather than a law enforcement nature, most Forest Rangers these days do not tote shootin' hardware.

Q.—What color were Texas longhorn cattle? —S.W. (Minn.)

A.—Just about all colors from black to white, with duns, roans, brindles, and yellowish reds and browns probably the most common.

Q.—I read a Western story (not in T.R.) in which the boss of a ranch was called "the ramrodder". I thought the old cowboy slang term was "ramrod".—Pop R. (Tex.)

A.—You thought right. That story writer must have invented a new word for himself.

Q.—I say Kansas is called the Jayhawker State, but my friend says it is the Sunflower State. Which one of us is right?—BeeBee (Ill.)

A.—Both of you—and that ain't all! Kansas has more nicknames than Carter had oats, also being called the Central, Cyclone, Garden, Squatter and Grasshopper State.

Q.—Where in the West can I go to trap beavers?—F.J.K. (N.H.)

A.—Nowhere that I know of, unless you can get a job with the game department of some Western state. As far as I know, beavers are on the protected list in all Western states and may be trapped only by game wardens in order to remove them from streams where their dam building does more harm than good.

Q.—Who was Bucky O'Neill?—T.J. (Ky.)

A.—William (Bucky) O'Neill was a popular Arizona sheriff and newspaper man who fought and died in Cuba as a captain in Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War.

Q.—About what is the average height of a good cowhorse?—B.G.G. (Va.)

A.—How long is a stick? There are mighty good cowhorses both tall and short, but for an average I'd say about fifteen hands high, which means five feet, since a hand is four inches.

Q.—Does mistletoe grow anywhere in the West?—Sue M. (N.C.)

A.—Yes, mistletoe does grow in a good many parts of the Southwest, and doubtless serves the same purpose there as in the East—but I once heard a cowboy claim he had "smacked a heap more heifers behind the door than he ever had under a kiss-weed!"

—*S. Omar Barker*

LOBO COLONEL

Hatfield fired and the hunter pitched forward

A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY JACKSON COLE

When the fighting Texas Ranger had to reform or arrest a friend, he faced the greatest challenge of his entire career—a challenge that led to a furious gun showdown!

CHAPTER I

Heartbreak Assignment

THEY drifted quietly down into the brakes. Two men, letting their horses pick through the eroded gullies that led to the river. Behind, the little Texas burro on the lead rope carried a dead antelope.

Jim Hatfield held the lead astride his horse Goldy. The big yellow gelding snorted as sand slipped beneath his hoofs. Then, breaking free of the gullies, Goldy splashed into the sunset-reddened river to halt in midstream, wet to his hocks. He pulled the reins down and drank, blowing noisily.

Hatfield leaned elbow on saddle-horn and grinned at Goldy's eagerness. He was a big, competent man, who fitted the horse. A star and circle badge sparkled on his chest.

"Had enough, Jim?" His saddle companion, Colonel Jonathon Ames, kneed his blue mare up, dragging the reluctant burro. The burro's forefeet splashed orange drops of water. Colonel Ames laughed. "Old Sandy has, if you ain't."

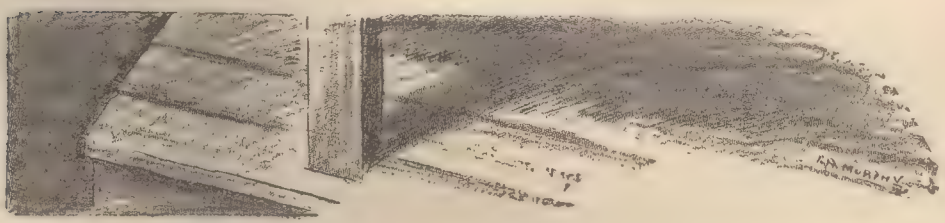
Hatfield thumbed back his hat. His wide shoulders made him look slim-waisted, even with the twin Frontier-model Colts and their thick, crossed cartridge belts. The little weather tracks around his gray eyes deepend in good humor.

"Huntin's no fun to a burro, Colonel. Just a long walk and a load to pack."

The Colonel grunted. He was thick and sturdy, with plenty of beef left in his shoulders. His mustache was gray now. The Colonel was a cattleman, and an expert in English history, and Hatfield's friend. He was also a criminal.

"But it's fun to you? Jim, seems to me you'd want to loaf, on your vacation."

Hatfield's gray eyes sobered. He said lightly, "Postman's holiday, Colonel," and nudged Goldy on across the river.



Climbing the opposite bank, with Goldy's smooth muscles bunching under him, Jim Hatfield felt again the painful gnaw of old guilt. He hated living a lie. He hated idleness in the face of an urgent task. Worst of all, he hated the knowledge that even after fifteen years, he still couldn't understand the Colonel.

He remembered what Ranger Cap'n Bill McDowell had told him back in Austin.

"The Colonel earned his title during the Texas revolution. And he's a former senator, too. He's got plenty friends left, over in the Capitol. When a big man like that goes lobo—Jim, this could be the nastiest thing we've ever handled."

Hatfield had known what McDowell meant. If he chose, the Colonel could bring powerful political pressure to bear on the Texas Rangers.

He'd said, "Cap'n, the Colonel gave me a job busting broncs once, fifteen years ago. He's the closest to a father I can remember. If I can settle this without a court trial—"

"If you can," Cap'n McDowell had said grimly, "You'll maybe have saved your own job, Jim. And mine, too."

THAT had been ten days ago. And now after a week here, Hatfield was still guiltily postponing the first obvious step.

The whole business upset the orderliness of his mind. Criminals should not be students of English history. They shouldn't be his friends. It disturbed him deeply that he still liked and admired the Colonel, that he didn't want to arrest the old man.

Even after the letter.

The letter rustled in his shirt pocket as he climbed out of the brakes and struck the Colonel's cross fence. It wasn't an unusual letter. Hatfield had received many of them in his long career as Cap'n McDowell's Number One trouble shooter. But somehow the novelty never wore off; a man never got used to somebody threatening to kill him.

He reined in at the top of the brakes. The cross fence stretched away between red cedar posts, a glistening expanse of sharp, four-point pole corrals. Scattered nearby were the Colonel's headquarters buildings. Hatfield heard the Colonel's blue mare come grunting out of the brakes. He said sincerely, "Colonel, every time I see it, I like the layout better."

Colonel Ames chuckled. "I spent twenty years building this place, Jim. Mostly alone. It wasn't easy, especially when Martha was a chick."

"I remember. You were still bunking in the soddie when I peeled broncs for you, fifteen years ago. You were a good boss, Colonel. You worked harder'n any hired hand."

"I had to. I started with three scrub cows, a rifle, an ailing wife, and that soddie. And the damned soddie leaked."

Hatfield nodded. And now, he thought, the three cows had grown to a thousand fat head. The ailing wife slept in her grave, leaving a beautiful daughter. And the old grass-covered soddie in back of the big house was used these days to hold fruit from the orchard, canned for winter consumption.

Between the corrals and the soddie stood the Colonel's second home, built twelve years ago when the old man had begun to prosper. It was the bunkhouse now. Third and last came the big house, the white, two-story affair with a picket fence, with easy chairs on a honeysuckle-shaded porch, with water piped to the kitchen, with a set of English dining room furniture and Wong, the Chinese servant.

Hatfield said with unusual gravity, "Colonel, you've made this country. Weren't for you, the Panhandle'd still be naked prairie. The Rangers owe you a debt. And we know it."

He touched Goldy with the spurs and moved down the fence, his gray eyes somber. A messy job, he thought. How could anyone bring down the law's wrath on a man like that?

After supper, Colonel Ames took off his boots. He sat in the big leather chair in his library, smoking a Havana cigar. He rubbed his stockinged feet and grunted with pleasure like an old range horse rolling in dust.

Jim Hatfield cleaned his carbine, sit-

ting in a chair opposite. He lifted the gun by its barrel and pointed it at his eye, inspecting the shiny riflings.

"All right, Jim." The Colonel puffed white smoke ceilingward. "Martha's in town for the evening. You can talk."

Hatfield reversed the gun and thumbed cartridges into the magazine. He said nothing.

"You invited yourself up here," the Colonel went on irritably, "claimin' you were on vacation." The Colonel's snort lifted his mustache. "Vacation! You been

JIM HATFIELD

The Lone Wolf Lawman—who proves he has a heart as well as a brace of six-guns!

a week here! You never wasted a week in your whole life. Come on boy. Out with it!"

Hatfield grinned wryly. He leaned the carbine against a bookshelf. "All right, Colonel. I guess it's time." He stood up, gray eyes squarely on the old man. "I'm investigating you. On orders from Austin. Officially."

He turned quickly to the mantel to avoid the Colonel's hurt face. Crossed swords hung there, beside a red and gold coat of arms. Nearby, a large oil painting pictured the Colonel's ancestral plantation home in Virginia.

The Colonel said hoarsely, "Well, I'll be a horn-swoggled, suck-egg son of a nine-foot rattler!"

HATFIELD dropped a hand to the Colonel's shoulder. The shoulder shook. "I think we can — straighten it out."

The Colonel lifted dull, whipped eyes. "I fought for this state. I served in the Texas Senate. I built a ranch where they said a cow couldn't live." The Colonel's mouth twisted. "All right, Jim. So they're investigating me. Why?"

Hatfield stared back at the painting of the old plantation.

"Colonel, I reckon you know—this ain't easy on me."

"Sure, Jim." The Colonel's voice calmed. "I can savvy that."

"But when a Ranger gets an order—" Hatfield shrugged, spreading his hands. "Colonel, we've had too many complaints about Sand County. There've been three earthen stock tanks dynamited lately. Twelve windmills've collapsed because some sneak pulled the tower bolts. There've been twenty-two cases of fence cutting. Scrub bulls have been turned in to blooded stock. You know all that?"

The Colonel sighed and flicked his cigar stub at the fireplace. The stub rolled up against a blackened andiron.

"Yes. Who blames me, Jim?"

Hatfield said, "At least three or four men do the damage. Nobody knows who they are. The sheriff can't seem to catch 'em."

"Jim, who told you this?"

"When a homesteader needs money," Hatfield went on, "to replace a busted windmill, say, or a damaged stock tank, he comes to you. You loan him the money and take a mortgage on his place. Don't you, Colonel?"

The Colonel's jaw lumped hard. "If some of those cheap—"

"Colonel," Hatfield said, "you're hirin' that night-riding crew. You're driving away the homesteaders—or trying to. You want to turn the county into your own private dictatorship. I was sent here to

hobble you." He paused. "We haven't had a dictator in Texas since the revolution. It's kind of late to start."

Slowly the Colonel sank back into his easy chair and rubbed his stockinged feet. His unseeing eyes hung on the oil painting. Watching, Hatfield thought suddenly that this big comfortable ranchhouse was much like that old Virginia plantation home.

Then the Colonel said, "You've got no proof of all this, Jim."

Hatfield smiled with wry affection. "Not lawsuit proof, no. But, Colonel, I know you. You soldiered with old Sam Houston. You're like him. Old Sam was a great man—a statesman and an empire builder. But he was a filibusterer. And so're you."

The Colonel said tartly, "Bosh!"

Hatfield shook his head. "It ain't bosh. Look. You're a dreamer. A planner. You had a dream in your head when you built this ranch. You started with an idea folks said was crazy and turned it into cows and grass and fences and a ranchhouse. Texas owes you thanks for that. But a man can dream too far, Colonel. You and Martha and your hired hands have legal homesteads, all under your control. You can't take any more. You've got neighbors."

ANGRILY the Colonel pulled his mustache. "Jim, go back to Austin and tell 'em they're fools."

Hatfield studied the Colonel gravely. He took the folded paper from his shirt pocket. "Colonel, I got this through the mail the other day."

The Colonel took the letter with steady fingers. He read it, chewing his mustache. "Orders you to leave the county. Says you'll be killed if you don't. No signature."

"Nope. No handwriting, either. The letters are cut off a tomato can label and pasted to the sheet."

The Colonel tossed the letter aside and reached for a fresh cigar. His eyes glittered as bright and hard as the crossed swords over the mantel. "You ain't dead yet."

Hatfield expelled a short, mirthless laugh. "Nor I don't aim to be. I've had these before." He sobered. He stood gravely over his old friend. "But I haven't told you the funny part. I prowled around your kitchen yesterday while Wong shopped in town. And Colonel—you use the same brand of tomatoes those letters came from."

Grunting, the Colonel rolled to his stockinged feet. He hobbled to the mantel, jabbed a match against the andiron and lit his cigar. He spoke through a cloud of smoke.

"Jim, a hundred people besides me use that brand of tomatoes."

Hatfield said quietly, "Quit wigglin', Colonel. You're getting in too deep. You wrote the letter. To scare me. But I don't scare worth a plugged centavo."

CHAPTER II

Knife in the Dark

IT WAS what Jim Hatfield wanted to say. It was what he'd put off saying for a week. His spurs jangled as he crossed to the Colonel. The Colonel puffed his cigar fiercely, fists clenched. His arm was knotted where Hatfield touched it.

"Look," Hatfield said gently, "I'm going out to check Goldy. We'll talk some more. But I ain't going to arrest you, Colonel. Unless you force me."

Turning, he left the library, picking up his hat at the door.

Outside, a breeze from the river laid cool dampness on his face. He stalked through the dark yard. A chunk of high-riding moon threw down a ghostly radiance, casting familiar objects into mist. Hatfield pushed through the picket gate and felt his boot heels sink into sand as he struck out past the bunkhouse for the corrals.

A dove chirped sleepily. From somewhere west sounded the lonesome yip of a coyote. He smiled, skirting a sage clump,

glad to be outdoors and away from the pull of loyalties. He thought how gentle this country sometimes was to a man who loved it.

Goldy came snuffling quietly to the corner of the corral to meet him. The big yellow horse—a tawny cream in this fitful light—poked his head over the peeled poles. Hatfield caught the sorrel's ear and twisted playfully, grinning. Goldy snorted, shoved his nose roughly against Hatfield's chest.

Hatfield whispered, "How's the Colonel's kaffir, Goldy? Pretty good, after them Austin oats?"

Goldy nosed Hatfield's chest again, then suddenly thrust up his handsome head. His nostrils spread wide, twitching. His ears tipped forward. It was the ears that warned Hatfield. The feel of danger hit him like a wet rag on the back of the neck.

He dropped to his knees.

The whimper of sound was too short-lived for identification. But the solid wooden tunk that followed was plain enough. The knife struck a peeled pole three feet from Hatfield's shoulder.

It shimmered there in the moonlight, a bluish, glistening steel thing. It made a vibrant little singing noise.

Hatfield moved by instinct. But it was the conditioned instinct of long training, that discouraged panic. Instead of pulling a gun and blasting at the night, he threw himself face-down into grass. He lay frozen rigid.

He listened.

Goldy's breath wheezed through dilated nostrils. Far off, the coyote yipped again. Seconds later, a nearer coyote answered. Hatfield waited.

He knew the knife thrower was close. He knew, too, that he had carelessly silhouetted himself against the moon. The breeze rustled sagebrush.

Then, softly, boots whispered through grass, off to the left.

Hatfield drew and fired.

The blast shook him momentarily. Its flash wiped vision from his eyes like a curtain. He blinked, counting to three. Then he could see again, through coiling, acrid powder-smoke.

Somebody had flung open the bunkhouse door. Dazzling light spilled yellow across the sage. A man blundered out, buckling on a gun-belt. Inside the bunkhouse, Hatfield saw another puncher hurriedly high-stepping into his breeches. He sighed and got to his feet, knowing his chance was gone.

He pulled the knife from the pole and stuck it in his belt. He spoke a soothing word to Goldy. When he reached the bunkhouse, a cluster of armed men were already stampeding aimlessly about the grounds, lanterns in hand. Like a bunch of fireflies, Hatfield thought. He saw Colonel Ames' bulky figure slide from the shadows of the porch.

"What's goin' on?" The Colonel's voice lifted mellow through the night.

THE punchers looked to be the steady kind. They all watched Hatfield as he stalked out of the shadows. Grave-faced men, a little older than the average drifting cowhand. They wore mustaches, even a beard or two. They stood around dressed as the alarm had caught them, some in undershirts, some with big bare toes fidgeting uneasily among the sand burs. One man looked incongruously lean in only boots, hat, a suit of white-legged underwear, and his gun. Hatfield grinned.

"Go back to bed, boys. I took a pot shot at a coyote."

Colonel Ames hobbled into the light, puffing a little. "You get him?"

Hatfield said coolly, "No." He saw the Colonel's eyes go to the knife at his belt. The Colonel bit quickly at his lower lip. Then faintly over the night drifted the beat of approaching hoofs.

The underwear-clad puncher yelped, "Miss Martha!" and dived for the bunkhouse.

Martha Ames swept erect in her side-saddle round the corner of the picket fence on her white mare. She waved and rode on to the pens.

Colonel Ames grunted, "I'll unsaddle her. You go to the library, Jim. Rest of you boys call it a night."

The little group broke up. Jim Hatfield strolled back to the library, where Mong, the Chinese servant, offered him cakes and coffee. Hatfield accepted a cake but skipped the coffee with thanks. He was brushing crumbs from his chaps when Martha and the Colonel joined him.

Martha lifted off her hat and took a cake from Wong. She was eighteen, blonde, with just enough of her dad's sturdiness. She wore a long riding skirt to cover her ankles comfortably in her side-saddle. She said, "Oh, Dad, I had a wonderful visit! Jim, you should've been there! Helen McGraw's just the girl you ought to meet!"

Hatfield wrinkled his nose at her. "Matchmaker." He watched her perch smiling on the arm of her dad's chair and rumple his sparse hair.

Colonel Ames peered up at Martha.

"You look mighty chipper, girl. You didn't see anybody else? Just Doc and Helen?"

Martha flushed. "Well, George Tree was there. Doc had some dandelion wine in from Missouri. He wanted George to sample it. They—they played a game of checkers." She nibbled her lip, watching the Colonel closely. "I couldn't help it, Dad."

The Colonel said, "No?" and pushed to his feet with a kind of savage abruptness. His mustache threw a stern shadow on his mouth. Jim Hatfield leaned forward, fingers tense on his knee cap. The name George Tree echoed in his mind. He reached in his memory and dragged it out. George Tree was the rancher who'd written that letter to Cap'n Bill McDowell, that bitter letter accusing Colonel Ames of wrecking the county, of land greed.

It was George Tree's letter that had touched off Hatfield's own reluctant investigation. He glanced once more at the Colonel. The Colonel's face had queer, upright shadows on it.

"I told you to stay away from Tree," he said to his daughter.

Martha Ames came lithely off the arm of the easy chair. Standing there in her long riding skirt, her hour-glass figure aroused wry admiration in Hatfield, who was not used to admiring women. He grinned at the high color of her cheekbones.

"I told you I couldn't help it. I didn't invite him."

The Colonel's voice coarsened in anger. "He's no good for you. A poverty-stricken, shoestring rancher. Girl, he's not your kind."

HER LIP twisted in youthful contempt for the views of maturity.

"My kind! What is my kind, Dad? Just because he's—

"A homesteader!" the Colonel snorted. "A windmill homesteader!"

Martha's chin moved stubbornly. "You were a homesteader yourself, once!"

"Sure." The Colonel's fists were white ridges of flesh. "But I opened a new land, instead of slipping in for the gravy after somebody else'd already killed and cooked the chicken." The Colonel blew against his mustache scornfully and leveled a trembling forefinger at his daughter. "Girl, these homesteaders ain't cattlemen. They don't know grass, nor cows, nor markets, nor finance. They don't know anything except windmills, blast 'em!"

Martha's eyes blazed on her father. Her head tilted at an odd, proud angle.

"I might as well tell you. Dad—I love him. If he'll have me, I—I'm going to marry him."

Jim Hatfield felt his own fingers digging into his knee. He suppressed an impulse to cheer. The Colonel's round face purpled like a radish.

"Martha, you stay clear of that whelp! Else I'll blacksnake him! I mean it, girl! I'll take the horsewhip to him!"

Big crystal tears sprang out of Martha's eyes and slid fatly down her cheeks.

"Dad," she said, "if you lay a hand on George Tree, I—I'll leave you! I'll ride away, and you'll never see me again!" Her lip quivered. She firmed it. "And I mean that!"

Picking up her skirt, Martha fled the room. Jim Hatfield caught the twinkle of slim legs down the hall. Her bedroom

"Light, Hatfield," said Foreman. "Light, and I am going to beat your ears off!"

door thudded shut. Silence overflowed the library, broken only by the slow tick of the wall clock.

The Colonel sighed. He hunched at the fireplace, twisting his hands behind him. Hatfield heard the drp rasp of the Colonel's fingers, the gusty heave of air through the Colonel's nose. The coal-oil lamp flickered; shadows fluttered like invisible ravens' wings among the long bookshelves. The clock ticked loudly.

Jim Hatfield rubbed his knee cap.

"Trouble," the Colonel growled at last. "All I got's trouble."

Hatfield nodded. He crossed his legs and rubbed the other knee cap, listening to the clock.

"Colonel," he said, "most men make their own troubles."

The Colonel snapped sourly, "You go to the devil!"

Hatfield grinned. Lazily he rose, pulled the knife from his belt. "Here's your sticker."

The Colonel scowled. "That ain't mine. Where'd you get it?"

"Somebody chucked it at me."

The Colonel grunted disinterestedly, "The devil you say!"

"It ain't yours?"

"Hell, no!"

Hatfield shrugged and slipped the knife back in his belt. He hadn't expected anything better. He moved up beside the Colonel and inspected the coat of arms hanging on the wall. He knew that there was a whole art to reading and understanding these medieval symbols. It was called heraldry. It was a completely unknown branch of knowledge to Hatfield. He said,

"Colonel, what does it mean? You de-

scended from some of those English kings?"

THE Colonel nodded grumpily. But he moved over and touched the coat of arms.

"Yes. See here. A gold shield, with a red cross between red crescents. Or to say it the heraldic way, a cross engrailed between four crescents gules. My ancestors were Crusaders, Jim. One of them—" The Colonel broke off, turned to stare at Hatfield with sunken eyes. "Why do you ask?"

Coolly Hatfield returned the Colonel's stare. "I'm trying to understand you. It ain't easy, you know." He jerked a thumb at the oil painting. "And you were raised on this plantation? The son of a rich man?"

The Colonel's jaw hardened. "I was."

Hatfield said quietly, "In other words, you're better'n most people."

"Damn you, Jim!" The Colonel's eyes glowed feverishly. "I didn't say that."

"But you meant it. You think it's all right for you to filibuster the county into your private kingdom, because you think you're better. Maybe you even figure it's for the county's good in the long run. I'm beginning to savvy how you tick, Colonel."

Hatfield yawned, stretched his long arms ceilingward.

"Well, I'm going to bed." He grinned. "Don't throw no more knives. Next time, you might accidentally hit me."

CHAPTER III

Wanton Destruction

HATFIELD had plenty to think about that night but, characteristically, he dropped immediately into black, empty sleep. Sunlight washed yellow across his bed when he awoke. A buzzing green fly explored a passage down his ear.

He shooed the fly away and dressed, humming. He was hungry. The smell of coffee from the dining room twitched his nostrils as he shaved. He went in to breakfast rubbing his palms and grinning.

Martha sat at the white-clothed walnut table before a glistening silver coffee pot. She'd looped her hair in a loose golden knot. Her cheeks were the faint pink of a ripening sand plum. She smiled at him.

"Morning, Jim. Dad sat up late last night, reading his history."

"Fine, Martha. Breakfast with a pretty girl's a treat for an old bachelor."

Martha poured coffee. "You're not old. And you needn't be a bachelor. Jim, you can't fool me. Plenty of girls would give t h e i r — well, their eye teeth to marry you, I bet."

Hatfield grinned at the sparkle in her eye. "Be a poor trade." Then he sobered. "Fact is, Martha, a Ranger's a fiddlefooted cuss. He hasn't a right to settle down."

Martha pursed her lips. "Men," she said. "Of all the silly creatures."

Hatfield accepted a plate of bacon and eggs from the silent Wong. He broke a biscuit, eyeing Martha with amusement.

"Sometimes the girls kind of fly off the hatchet, too. I've known a few."

"Phooey," Martha said. "Not like men. You should have heard George Tree last night, talking about Dad."

"Should I?" Hatfield looked at her quietly.

"Yes." She colored. "Of course, Dad's old-fashioned. He's still living in the days of his ancestors, really. You know, knights and ladies, who were supposed to have gentle blood. And the peasants did the work. Dad's out of step with the times. I know that."

"Martha," Hatfield said, "are you trying to tell me something?"

She laid down her fork. Her blue eyes hung on his face.

"All right, Jim. I guess I am." She leaned forward. "You see, I know the things they're saying about Dad—George and the others. I've heard them all. It doesn't matter. Because he's my dad, and I love him." She caught her lip between white teeth. "And besides, there isn't a

kinder, better man alive, Jim Hatfield! He rants and raves sometimes, like last night. But he wouldn't hurt a—a cockroach!"

Hatfield punctured his egg. The yolk spread over his plate. He had a tight, full feeling in his chest.

"I'm with you, Martha. All the way. And I'll say one thing more."

He picked up his coffee cup and grinned. "George Tree's a lucky man."

After breakfast, Hatfield saddled Goldy. He rode out of the pens and let the heavy gate squeal shut on unoiled hinges. He cantered across the sun-baked prairie.

Already the burning wind of another day whined over the sage. It flung sand in his face. The six-guns bobbed gently on his thighs. His saddle carbine rode snugly between leg and stirrup fender. He tipped his head against the wind to anchor his hat.

Entering a prairie dog town, he slowed to a walk, kneeing Goldy away from the treacherous, mounded holes that would break a horse's leg. The grass here was clipped as neatly as a lawn. Now and then a dog popped up to sit erect on his little hilltop, forepaws dangling, chattering like the angry squirrel he was.

Hatfield saw a rattlesnake slither through the grass, but before he could shoot it, it slid headfirst into a hole, from which it had dispossessed the original homesteaders.

BEYOND the prairie dog town he struck the Colonel's line fence. He followed it until he came to a gate, then passed through. He was on nester land now.

Windmills glittered against the sky, wheeling discs atop gaunt skeletons. Here, cut off from the river by the Colonel's fences, cattle and men depended on steel pipe and wooden tanks for water.

Hatfield passed small bunches of cattle, hemmed in tight pastures. This was a different type of operation from the Colonel's vast grassland enterprise. Small size compelled the nesters to control their grazing carefully, to make one acre do the work of two.

Jog-trotting down the sandy road, Hatfield began to see the old familiar trademarks of night-riding hoodlums. From a herd of bawling red and white shorthorn cows, he saw an angry stockman cut a leggy, snorting longhorn bull out through a break in the pasture fence. The stockman's face worked with white rage. He fingered his six-gun longingly.

Hatfield rode up, introduced himself, and looked the bull over for brands and earmarks. It had none.

"The Colonel's too smart for that," the cowman said angrily. "But I'd swear on my kid's head it was his'n. Ranger, if you and that fat Sheriff Daley can't stop these shenanigans, somebody else's apt to. And you won't like how."

At the moment, Hatfield couldn't answer that. He gave the stockman friendly warning to let the law take its course and pushed on.

A half mile further on, he saw an earthen stock tank that had been dynamited, wasting precious water. Below the raw blasted earth lay a bog of yellow mud. Three gaunt-ribbed cows bawled around hopelessly.

Hatfield fought a sickish churning in his belly at this wanton destruction.

Presently, passing a yellow frame house, he remembered that Cap'n McDowell had asked him to report his presence to George Tree, so that the rancher would know his letter had got results. Hatfield asked directions of a sad-faced woman in a faded blue dress.

"Two miles up the trail, Ranger. George'll be to home, all right. Fixin' fence, most likely." Her eyes were bitter. "We had more cuttin', last night."

Hatfield smiled with forced cheer and rode on. Jogging past the next ranch he saw the twisted, collapsed frame of a damaged windmill. Two or three tower bolts had been removed, allowing the whole thing to break in the middle like a match stick before the high Panhandle wind. The wheel dragged the ground now, its bent blades beginning to rust.

He found George Tree fixing fence, as the woman had guessed. Tree slammed a

post-hole digger into the sandy soil with violence enough to bulge the muscles in his back. He was a big, tow-headed, shirtless man; sweat dripped from the sharp bones of his shoulder blades. Appraising him, Hatfield saw how Martha could be impressed. He rode up and said quietly, "Tree?"

George Tree jumped as if a horse fly had bitten him. He spun, big fists gripping the post-hole digger.

"Take it easy, boy," Hatfield said.

George Tree grinned, then. His face was young enough, but the lines around the eyes belonged to an older man. "Sorry, mister. I was workin' off a mad."

"Were you? What about?"

Tree's grin slipped away. "Lots of things. If it's any of your—" Then Tree's eyes dropped, caught by the sparkle of the star and circle badge. "Hey! You're a Ranger?"

"I am. Name of Hatfield. Cap'n Bill McDowell asked me to see you." Hatfield slid from Goldy's back and stretched out his hand, smiling. George Tree clutched Hatfield's arm in strong fingers. His young face beamed.

"I've heard of you. Gosh! I never thought they'd send the Lone Wolf, himself. When'd you get to Sand County?"

"A week ago. I'd've looked you up before, but——"

"A *week!*" Tree's fingers released Hatfield's arm. His stare lifted incredulously. "You been here a week! And you ain't arrested the Colonel yet?"

HATFIELD shook his head, studying young Tree sharply. Bitter grooves took shape around Tree's mouth.

"Why?" Tree snapped.

Hatfield said mildly, "For one thing, Tree, I need proof that the Colonel's committed a crime. It's the custom, you know."

Abruptly George Tree whirled and drove his post-hole diggers with savage accuracy into the hole he'd dug. He stalked a dozen feet away, where his shirt lay on the grass. He stamped back twisting sweat-shining shoulders into the shirt.

"I can show you proof. What you want to see? Busted windmills? Cut fences? Dynamited water wells? Scrub bulls turned in on blooded stock? A crooked sheriff? We got 'em all!"

Jim Hatfield said quietly, "Sit down, George. And cool off. You'll get heat stroke."

George Tree's eyes glittered, then he shrugged. He squatted on his heels, fished "makings" from his pocket, and shook tobacco into paper. His mouth had a lopsided look as he slipped the cigarette into it.

"George," Hatfield said gravely, "I can look at busted windmills and damaged fences from now to next week. But it won't prove the Colonel's responsible for them."

George Tree cupped a match in big, capable hands and sucked fire into his cigarette. Smoke drifted from his nose; the wind snatched it away.

"Who else," Tree asked grimly, "would want to wreck the county? Who else could pay off a crooked sheriff? Who else could hire a gang of thugs to do the work?"

Hatfield's eyebrows lifted. "So the Colonel *has* hired a gang?"

"He must've. He couldn't do it all himself."

Hatfield nodded. "Reckon you're right."

George Tree leaned forward. The grooves whitened around his mouth. "Hatfield, the Colonel's loanin' money, too. Half us poor fools are in his debt, right now. He don't like us, but he'll make loans."

"I've heard. What you figure that means?"

"It means he's getting his greedy hands on every mortgage he can. It's a way of crowding honest men out of the county."

"Maybe, George. Or maybe he just wants to help the little fellows."

George Tree snorted contemptuously. "You don't believe that?"

"No," Hatfield admitted ruefully. "Afraid I don't. But look here. I still haven't any proof."

George Tree rubbed his sunburned

neck with big fingers. "Ranger," he asked grimly, "you been trying?"

For a heartbeat, Jim Hatfield didn't move. Blood stung his cheekbones. Then he grinned.

"George, I wouldn't take that from many men. But with you it's different. You see, I been talking to Martha."

George Tree looked up quickly through whipping cigarette smoke. His eyes narrowed. "Oh. Now I savvy."

"Do you?"

"So Martha's talked you into going easy with the old man?"

Warmth drained slowly from Jim Hatfield's face. He said quite calmly, "George, you poor damned fool!"

Turning, he caught up Goldy's reins. He put toe to stirrup and mounted. George Tree's boots kicked dry grass.

"Ranger," George Tree rasped, "I count on you to do your duty."

Hatfield glanced down. Tree's haunted eyes and grooved mouth laid age on the young face.

"Boy," Hatfield said gently, "quit being so proud of yourself."

CHAPTER IV

Tilting Against Windmills

GOLDY hit the sandy road toward the town of Redbank at a fast, jarring lope. The whining wind held heat; sweat dampened Hatfield's shirt. The sweat, the play of muscles, the feel of his hat brim beating against his eyes, gradually swabbed the bitterness from him. Topping the next rise, he pulled to a halt, letting Goldy blow. Here, with sand whipping past his face, he could see for miles.

Off to the right, the tree-fringed river meandered eastward to its rendezvous with the Arkansas, some four hundred far-off miles inside Indian territory. Near it, Hatfield glimpsed the Colonel's brightly shingled house. He even saw Wong, the Chinese servant, emptying dishwater in the packed earth of the back yard. Wong's figure was doll-like at this distance, but the dishwater caught red fire in the sunlight.

Up ahead, Hatfield saw the flat black tarpaper roofs of Redbank, dark postage stamps against green-purple sage. He could see the dusty Main Street, the big wooden courthouse, sand-scoured and unpainted, and even a six-horse stage wheeling into town, its yellow spokes glinting. He grinned, drawing silent pleasure from the scene, and yanked his hat brim down.

It'd be rich country, he thought. Man had scarcely touched it; future generations would tap unguessed wealth from this mineral-filled, sandy soil. Some day there'd be water. Not just river water, but water for crops. Already the clanking windmills that dotted the countryside were a start toward that.

Hatfield was fully aware of the economic importance of the windmill. It was the windmill that had brought cows here.

The nature of a cow brute, he thought, demanded three things — grass, salt and water. Grass was plentiful in the Panhandle. Salt could be set around in wooden boxes. But twenty years ago, when Colonel Ames had been the first cowman here, only the river had provided water.

Then the windmill had come.

Windmill water had opened up ten million acres of idle grassland. With the windmill had come homesteaders. Like locusts, settling hungrily on land Colonel Jonathon Ames had pioneered. It was these homesteaders the Colonel was fighting. He fought by attacking the thing that gave them and their cattle life in this arid land — the whirling machine that stood against the wind and drew saving moisture from the earth's deep rocks.

Hatfield sighed, deep in his chest. This, then, was his problem. Not to send the Colonel to jail, but to convince the old man he was wrong. To find legal evidence against his friend and use it as a lever. If he could make the Colonel see his folly, if he could force the old man to call off his mysterious hired thugs, to pay peace-

fully for the damaged windmills and other property—

It would be easier that way. But more important, it'd be easier for the Colonel, too.

Hatfield touched Goldy's sweaty neck. "It's a big job. And young George Tree won't make it easier, bawling for an arrest."

Goldy whickered and tossed his head. Hatfield grinned. "You're with me, ain't you, boy?"

It was a solid comfort.

He saw more cut fences, more damaged windmills, in the gently rolling hills around town. But at length Hatfield found one neglected-looking homestead that puzzled him.

The fences hadn't been cut, but they sagged. Here and there a wire had pulled loose from its post. A few cull calves grazed lonesomely inside. The carelessly constructed barbed wire gate hung gaping, a tangled mess of slack wire.

CURIOUS, Hatfield entered and urged Goldy toward a boxlike frame house with a precariously tilted chimney. He wondered why the Colonel's thugs had left this place alone.

A man came riding around the house on a white horse. His stirrups were too short, thrusting his knees into a high, awkward position. He bounced in saddle like an animated sack of oats. Seeing Hatfield, the man yanked the reins savagely and cursed the white horse to a standstill.

He was a small man, wearing mostly range garb. His uncreased, Mexican style hat stood incongruously tall. His trousers, of fine black dress material, stuck in Hatfield's mind and dredged up a memory.

"Foreman," he said. "Lyle Foreman." He kneed Goldy forward and grinned. "Lawyer Lyle, from San Antone."

"Jim Hatfield!"

Lyle Foreman had black, scowling eyes. He was sunburned. Pink skin peeled from his beaked nose. His raw, blistered chin was unshaven in patches. But a high, intelligent forehead, shaded by the big hat, still showed white.

"What bad luck brings you here?"

Hatfield laughed. He knew Foreman well. The man had been a lawyer until Hatfield had caught him forcing perjury on a witness, down in San Antonio a year ago. Foreman had been a defender of petty criminals, a suspected smuggler, one of the wolfish, smart kind who operated on the fringes and loop-holes of the law. Hatfield slid easily into the taunting repartee necessary to handle the man.

"Lookin' for thieves, Lyle, like always. But I didn't figure to find a crooked lawyer, too."

Lyle Foreman wrinkled his sunburned face and cursed Hatfield. He was a good swearer. He knew all the words and could make up new combinations as he went. Sweat trickled down his red cheeks as he mouthed foul language.

Hatfield leaned elbow on saddle-horn and grinned quietly through the tirade. Then he said coolly:

"One thing I like, Lyle. You don't do nothing by halves. If it's bribing a witness or cussing. Too bad you ain't honest. You'd be quite a man."

Lyle Foreman gritted through pinched lips, "You disbarred me, you dirty—"

"Nope." Hatfield shrugged. "You disbarred yourself. What's your business, 'way up here in the Panhandle? I thought you liked the lights and the pretty girls."

"I'm a homesteader," Foreman said sullenly.

"You!" Hatfield couldn't stop the laugh. "Working for a living? Quit it, Lyle."

Lyle Foreman stepped off his white horse. His hand swung dangerously near the black-butted gun on his thigh.

"Light," Foreman said. His mouth shook. "Light, Hatfield. I've waited a year for this. I'm going to beat your ears off."

Jim Hatfield blinked in surprise. He straightened his shoulders, pulling his elbow off the saddle-horn. He hadn't intended to prod Foreman so far. Experience had taught him that Foreman was a violent, abusive man, to be handled violently. Still, if the ex-lawyer had

actually turned honest—

He said quietly, "Lyle, I can be wrong. If I am, I'll say so. You really mean that, about homesteading?"

Lyle Foreman slapped the white horse viciously on the rump. The animal snorted back to the ramshackle house. Foreman unstrapped his gun-belt, tossed it away. He threw off his big hat. His forehead glistened, a slab of white topping his peeling face. There was an unnatural, cunning look to his eyes.

"Get down. If you're not yellow!"

Hatfield scratched his chin in bafflement. Foreman's attitude seemed faked, unreal. He spoke curtly, "Lyle, I asked a question. If you're going straight, I'll—hell, I'll apologize."

"Get down," Foreman said. "Or I drag you."

Jim Hatfield shrugged mildly, then. "This country's crazy. Everybody gets hurt feelings." But he swung down off Goldy's back.

HE DIDN'T want to fight. It wasn't his business here. But he had Ranger tradition to uphold. The effectiveness of the Rangers depended in large part on the fear inspired in lawbreakers. If gossip whispered that a Texas Ranger had run from a challenge—Hatfield knew he had no choice.

Slowly he stripped off his guns and hung them on Goldy's saddle-horn, frowning. The man's motive eluded him. He said, "When you've had enough, Lyle, speak up."

Lyle Foreman snarled. "You snooping hound!" and charged.

It was wild, heedless, unskilled. Foreman came flailing his arms, his sunburned face reddening with exertion. It was ridiculously inept. Suspicious, Hatfield watched the wild fists, ready to weave inside. Almost too late, he saw the wolfish flash in Foreman's eyes, saw the slight shift of the man's shoulder as Foreman launched a wicked kick.

Hatfield twisted sideward, protecting himself by instinct. The hard boot toe

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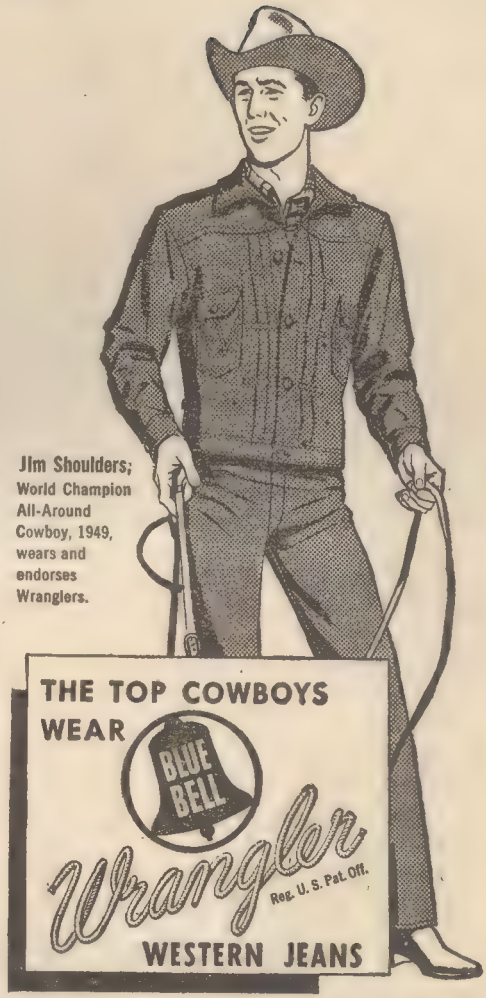
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caught his hip, scraping skin. A bruising pain spiraled down Hatfield's leg.

He hopped backward, grunting. The edges of his vision swam in red. Something jarred his jaw, tipping it — Foreman's fist. A second fist thrust air from his belly. Hatfield bent over, straightened, and slapped Foreman's face back-handed.

Foreman staggered out of reach, went to one knee, his fingers grappling sandy soil.

"You fight—dirty," Hatfield puffed. "I should've known, Lyle."

Fists clenched, Foreman crawled to his feet. Hatfield's slap had broken tender skin on Foreman's sunburned cheek. It bled a little.

"What you want?" Hatfield dragged burning air into his lungs. "To cripple me?"

Foreman gritted, "You damned right, Ranger," and stalked forward again, slower now. Watching the cautious approach, Hatfield suddenly knew that to cripple him was actually what Foreman did want.

He thumbed sweat from his nose and grinned. "You're taking a chance, Lyle."

Then abruptly, Foreman flung at him again.

Alert for treachery now, Hatfield warded off one blow easily. He jabbed a quick fist against Foreman's chest, heard Foreman's pained grunt. Then Foreman drew back his clenched fist like a cat's paw.

Some extra sense warned Hatfield. He knew, without understanding why, that there was sand in Foreman's fist. He shut his eyes as the fist dabbed toward his face.

Sand stung his eyelids and ticked against his teeth. He tasted it. He rolled sand on his tongue and tried to spit, and Foreman hit him again.

The force of that knocked loose sand off his face and sent Hatfield diving sideward. He struck dirt, rolled, and plowed to his feet again, feeling no pain, feeling nothing now but the animal urge to maim blindly.

He plunged at Foreman with big, hunched shoulders. Sudden terror spread over Foreman's peeled face. Hatfield moved into the man, into futile blows like rain on head and shoulders.

He caught Foreman's sweaty wrist in big fingers. He turned his back. Heaving on the wrist, he bent forward, feeling the arm pull, feeling finally the sharp snap of breaking bone. Foreman screamed and flew spread-eagled over Hatfield's head to land, a crumpled, bloody heap in a clump of nodding sage.

Jim Hatfield leaned against Goldy. He pulled great gulps of hot, sandy air into his lungs.

His eyelids burned. Grit from the handful of sand sent tears streaming down his dusty cheeks. But presently the convulsive movements of his chest eased. He straightened and stood, bleak-jawed, over the moaning shape of Lyle Foreman.

Foreman lay quietly, making that low, toneless moan. A jagged edge of bone had pierced his shirt sleeve. His eyes were bloodshot.

Hatfield thought fleetingly of a crippled animal, waiting for the bullet.

"Help me," Foreman whispered.

Hatfield nodded.

"Wait here, Lyle, I guess you're harmless now."

But he took the precaution of slipping Foreman's gun into his belt before striding toward the ramshackle frame house. Hatfield had no illusions about the ex-lawyer. A wolf might break a leg and allow a kind man to feed and doctor him; but that wolf remained a wolf.

In the house, he prowled musty, littered rooms until he found a half-clean sheet and an old broom. He tore the sheet in strips and snapped the broom handle over his knee.

CHAPTER V

A Wolf Is Always a Wolf

LYLE FOREMAN had lasped into semi-consciousness when Hatfield returned. The Ranger decided that was

just as well, for bandaging the arm would hurt, he knew. He did it gently, padding the pieces of broomhandle into makeshift splints, wrapping the arm in wide strips of the sheet. Lyle Foreman groaned once, when Hatfield first lifted the arm, then fainted completely.

Behind the house, in an old barn, Hatfield found a buggy. He caught Foreman's white horse, unsaddled it, backed it between the shafts. The animal behaved docilely enough, evidently as much accustomed to harness as to saddle.

After dousing his dusty face at the pump, Hatfield drove the buggy out to where the unconscious Foreman lay.

He lifted Foreman to the buggy seat, tied Goldy's reins to a rear spring, and set out for town and a doctor.

The white horse proved a brisk stepper. It tossed its mane and trotted smartly down the road. The buggy wheels picked up loose sand and spun a few g r a i n s around the felloes. Lyle Foreman's hat had fallen off somewhere; the wind whipped black hair around his slack, unconscious face.

A mile from town, Hatfield heard thudding hoofbeats behind him. He pulled to the roadside, not really expecting danger, but taking no chances. Foreman didn't need immediate attention, he knew. The lawyer's broken arm was not serious. Hatfield had a gun in his fist when a booted rider swept abreast on a dun stallion.

It was George Tree.

Seeing Hatfield, Tree reined the stallion to a dancing halt. The young homesteader had bathed and changed. Hatfield noticed wet comb marks in his yellow hair. Smiling, he reholstered the six-gun.

"You ought to wear a hat, George. You'll bake your brains."

George Tree grinned and rubbed the back of his neck. He wore a clean white shirt and his blue levis had a scrubbed, faded look. George kicked the stallion closer. Unaccountably he flushed.

"Hatfield, I'm glad to run across you. I been thinking. I want to apologize. I reckon I spoke out of turn, back there."

Jim Hatfield tucked the buggy whip in its socket and wrapped the reins around it. He stepped out of the buggy, his smile widening.

"George, I like a man who can admit he's wrong."

George Tree's relieved grin split his face. He looked boyish. Dismounting, Tree gripped Hatfield's hand in his big fingers.

"I ain't often such a danged fool. But—well, Martha Ames and I had an argument last night. I was mad about it, and I took it out on you."

Hatfield leaned easily against the buggy w h e e l, relaxing a bruised shoulder muscle. "Lovers' spat?"

Tree's smile straightened. He pulled makings from his shirt pocket.

"You might say. Martha got to talking about her pa. Said I didn't understand the old man." Tree blew two cigarette papers apart, scowling. "Understand, hell!"

Leisurely Jim Hatfield hooked a boot heel into a buggy spoke.

"George," he said gently, "You got to remember. Martha's like any young girl. Proud as a turkey hen."

Tree shook his head. He twisted together his cigarette and licked it. The white grooves stood plainly around his mouth.

"She's too proud for me. I'm through." George flushed again, faintly. "I'm riding to town now to see Helen McGraw. Her'n me used to go to square dances, once in a while."

HATFIELD tilted his hat against the sun's glare and remembered Martha, last night. She loved this young man. She'd marry him, if he asked her. Hatfield felt a tired emptiness. He forced a grin.

"Wish you luck. Helen McGraw's the doctor's daughter, ain't she? You and me're heading the same way, then." He jerked his thumb toward the buggy.

George Tree peered into the buggy and saw Foreman's unconscious form for the first time. His jaw slacked.

"Holy jumping Jeruselam! What hit him?"

"He got in a fight," Hatfield said, grinning.

"With you?"

Hatfield nodded.

George Tree's lips puckered in a soundless whistle. "You sure messed him up. How come?"

Quietly Hatfield explained. He told George how he hadn't wanted to fight, how Foreman had forced it on him. He mentioned his suspicion that Foreman had tried to cripple him. George Tree flung away his cigarette and clutched Hatfield's arm excitedly.

"Hatfield, it adds up. Foreman wanted to hurt you so bad you'd be put out of the way. He wanted to stop your investigation. He's afraid of you. That means he's workin' with the Colonel. Must be!"

"Kind of looks like it," Hatfield agreed. "But George, what good's a man like Foreman to the Colonel? Foreman can't even ride a horse to speak of."

"Foreman's a good boss." George's eyes shone. "Look, maybe you haven't been here long enough to know it, but Foreman hangs out with a gang of rough characters. At the Red Rooster Saloon, in town. There's about six of them. They're oldtimers, used to hunt buffalo hereabouts twenty years ago. They're drunks and toughs, and they know the country."

Soberly Jim Hatfield rubbed the flat of his palm across his chin. It made sense. Buffalo hunters would naturally hate homesteaders as violently as the Colonel did, himself. Wrecking windmills and cutting fences would be enjoyable work to that half-civilized breed of man. And Lyle Foreman, clever, unscrupulous and experienced in shady deals, would make an ideal liaison man between the Colonel and such hirelings.

He said wryly, "George, you've got to hand it to the Colonel. He picks the man to suit the job. If I wanted to hire toughs, I'd hire buffalo hunters. And for a secret boss, Foreman'd be the best I know."

George Tree nodded vigorously. "The Colonel's smart, Hatfield. Plenty. That's what bothered me when I lit into you, back there. I was afraid he'd even outsmarted *you!*"

"Maybe he will." Hatfield grinned. He thought how scandalized George would be if the young fellow knew that Hatfield's true aim was to save the Colonel from his own folly. He shifted the subject. "George, I haven't seen the sheriff yet. But I've wondered—how come he hasn't nabbed some of these buffalo hunters? Is he the Colonel's man, too, George?"

"Hand and foot!" George's mouth twisted with contempt. "That fat fool couldn't have got thirty honest votes. Yet he was elected."

"What!" Hatfield gripped George's arm. "You mean the election returns were faked?"

"They *must've* been! But nobody can prove it." Suddenly grave, Tree eyed him searchingly. "Is it important?"

Hatfield dropped his chin in a curt nod. His gray eyes pinched with thought. "If the Colonel faked the election returns, he's made a bad mistake. Because you can't rig a ballot count without bribing a lot of officials, two or three to each precinct, anyhow. And if the Colonel's bribed a lot of men, I'll find one who can be made to talk." Hatfield slapped Tree's shoulder. "It's the first decent lead I've had."

GEORGE TREE flushed with enthusiasm. "Doc McGraw can help you. He got mad as blazes when the election went the wrong way. He went around asking questions and writing letters to the newspaper, until the sheriff told him to shut up. Said he'd arrest Doc for disturbing the peace."

Hatfield said, "I want to meet Doc. And the sheriff."

George Tree grinned. "What we waiting for?"

The town of Redbank was built like a flat, rectangular cake, cut into squares. The squares were town blocks. In the

center of the cake stood the courthouse, occupying a block all its own. It was a shabby frame two-story building, unpainted, surrounded by a clipped brown lawn. A small windmill clanked in midstreet, pumping a trickle of cool water into a galvanized iron horse tank.

Hatfield had seen a hundred towns like it. Always there was a line of straggly cottonwood trees up Main Street. Always saloons, a dinky hotel, a few seedy stores, a cluster of neat houses.

Women in sunbonnets moved demurely up the boardwalks. One led a small child with a sticky striped candy stick. Two lawyers emerged from the courthouse carrying satchels — bearded men who wore shoestring ties and walked with dignity, one fat, one gauntly lean. A white-tarped freight wagon stood backed to the door of a grocery. Barrels of vinegar, pickles, salt, crackers and canned goods were being unloaded by a sweating man in a red undershirt.

And all this, Hatfield thought, because of grass. Grass was the basic fact of life here in the Panhandle. Cattle ate the grass and multiplied and grew fat. Men sold the cattle to fill dinner tables in the East. Cattle money supplied the sunbonnets and the stick candy and the barrels of groceries, paid the lawyers' fees. Cattle money made a man rich—if he first had grass.

Hatfield believed he understood Colonel Ames' greed for grass. He didn't approve it, but he understood it.

George Tree spurred his dun stallion up beside the buggy and broke Hatfield's reverie. "Here's the Doc's. Tie the buggy outside. He keeps office in the parlor."

Hatfield lugged the slack form of Lyle Foreman up the slatted board walk.

Doc McGraw's cottage stood on Main, cater-cornered from the town's business section. Honeysuckle climbed white latticework around the porch. Its smell mingled strangely with the acrid scents of asafedita and chloroform. Hatfield wrinkled his nose.

"Doc's like that," George said. "Sour and sweet, mixed."

A pretty, dark girl opened the front door. She wore a gingham dress and a white apron. Her brown eyes swept Hatfield alertly, resting a moment on his star and circle badge, then darted to Lyle Foreman's bandaged arm. Silently she nodded to George Tree and held the door open for Hatfield.

Inside, the house was dim and cool. Hatfield felt carpeting underfoot. He saw a vase of flowers on a table, the blossoms spotlighted by a vagrant ray of sunlight through drawn window blinds. Then a side door opened and a gruff voice said, "What now?"

Doc McGraw stood with hand on doorknob, scowling. He was a big man in a doctor's white coat with the sleeves cut off. He wore no tie. He was bald, except for a halo of stiff white hair. But a mat of white hair showed on his chest, where the tie should have been, and coarse white hair salted his burly forearms. Doc McGraw's glance went sharply to Lyle Foreman.

"Broken arm?"

Hatfield nodded.

"Bring him in." Doc turned and waddled into his office. He flung back over his shoulder, "Helen, I'll need you."

HATFIELD stepped into a light, airy room with shining glass cases around the walls and an old kitchen table in the center.

"Lay him on the table," Doc said curtly. "Then git out of here." Already he had poured water from a pitcher and was scrubbing his hands.

Jim Hatfield laid Foreman down, crossing the injured arm over the lawyer's chest. "Doc, he ain't chirped for a half hour. Reckon he's all right?"

Doc McGraw dried his hands and crossed to Foreman, stepping quickly despite his bulk. He thumbed Foreman's eyelid back, peered intently, then grunted.

"Just passed out. He'll be all right. Now git, mister."

Hatfield pushed his hat to the back of his head. "I want to see you — when you're done."

Doc McGraw squinted up sharply. For the first time he noticed Hatfield's badge. His lips pressed together.

"So we finally got some law? Mister, I want to see you, too. You wait on the porch. And take young George, there, with you. If he come to tomcat around Helen, he can do it later."

Hatfield grinned. "You're the doctor. Come on, George."

CHAPTER VI

Would-Be Texas Dictator

FRAGRANT honeysuckle that shaded Doc McGraw's front porch caught the hot wind that swept Main Street, cooling it and filtering out the sand. Jim Hatfield sat in a rocker with his hat off, feeling his sweaty heat and muscular weariness lift gently.

George Tree swept a pocket comb through his yellow hair.

"The Doc's an old-timer here," he said conversationally. "His first patients were Indians and buffalo hunters — and the Colonel."

"That so?" Hatfield was only half listening. There was a gap in the honeysuckle, through which he could see the wood-awning entrance to the hotel downstreet. It was like looking through a pipe. He could see the awning, a section of doorway, and the rump of a horse tied at the hitchrail. The horse had Colonel Ames' C A brand on its hip.

As Hatfield watched idly, a blonde head came round the horse and a girl stood before the hotel door. When she turned, he glimpsed her face. It was Martha Ames.

He could see her head and shoulders. She stood looking upstreet, biting her lip. Her glance swept the courthouse, then went on past the grocery and up toward where Hatfield sat behind the honeysuckle. Her eyes looked directly at him for a moment, but he knew he was invisible. Then Martha caught sight of the horses before Doc McGraw's house, and Hatfield saw that she recognized George Tree's dun.

She glanced once more at the house. Her expression broke apart in a pinched, miserable look.

Hatfield said, "There's Martha Ames. Over by the hotel."

George Tree said, "Oh?" disinterestedly, and stretched his boots out on the porch floor. Hatfield glanced at him quickly and read tight-lipped stubbornness in him. George rubbed the back of his neck and fumbled for his makings, his cheeks a little red.

Despite himself, Hatfield sighed. When he looked back through the opening in the honeysuckle, Martha had disappeared.

George Tree was snubbing out his cigarette when the front door clicked open and Lyle Foreman walked out. Foreman was pale to the lips. The unshaven patches on his sunburned face stood out startlingly black, like dirt streaks. His thickly splinted left arm hung in a white sling. Foreman halted on the porch and stared at Hatfield with livid hate in his black eyes.

Hatfield rose, smiling cheerfully. "Doc fix you up, Lyle?"

Foreman's face was wooden. "Give me my gun."

The impact of the man's hate wiped away Hatfield's smile. Gravely he nodded. He pulled Foreman's gun from his belt and unloaded it deliberately. He extended the empty gun in one hand, the five shiny cartridges—cupped in his palm—in the other. The muscles in his own face hardened.

Lyle Foreman's lower lip twisted out of shape. Foreman rammed the gun in holster, then dropped the cartridges loose into his trousers pocket.

"I'll see you again," he said.

"All right." Hatfield spoke calmly. "You do that, Lyle."

He knew now that Foreman was an implacable enemy. He felt a small, desolate sense of loss as he watched Foreman

stride down the slatted board walk and hoist himself awkwardly into his buggy. Every enemy, Hatfield thought, was a friend less. He wondered if he could have handled the man differently.

George Tree unknowingly answered that. "That hombre," Tree said, "is a sourbelly. His neighbors don't like him. He's down on the world, Hatfield."

Hatfield said, "Too bad," and turning, surprised Helen McGraw's curious gaze. Graw tossed her dark head. "You don't even know your own mind, George Tree." She smiled. "Well, come on in. You can butter the bread, or something. Ranger, Dad's waiting in his office for you."

Jim Hatfield followed the two young people inside and found Doc McGraw lifting a big brown bottle from a glass-enclosed shelf. Doc's white-clad figure, with its bristly halo of white hair, looked

KING OF RANCHES

ALTHOUGH everybody knows that the King Ranch, in Texas, is "as big as all outdoors," it's still hard to realize that its area is greater than the entire state of Rhode Island (976,000 acres). There's a whole month's difference in the seasons between the northern boundary line and the one on the south. Which doesn't describe its vastness half as well as the fact that the 100 special-built trucks and autos which patrol the place are equipped with compasses to keep them from losing their way. The fencing that surrounds it is 1,500 miles long—sufficient to stretch from New York to Fargo, North Dakota.

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—Bess Ritter

He grinned. "Ma'am, if all nurses were pretty as you, half of Texas'd be sick."

HER laugh sparkled with white teeth. "For that, Ranger, I'll invite you and George to dinner."

Hatfield nodded his thanks. "Reckon I better see your pa, then push on. But George, here, can speak for himself."

"I'll stay," George Tree said quickly.

Helen McGraw turned cool brown eyes on the young man. "All right, George. But let's have it understood. I'm not undercutting Martha."

George flushed pink. "Martha and I are finished."

"In a pig's eye!" Scornfully Helen McGraw tossed her dark head. "You don't even know your own mind, George Tree." She smiled. "Well, come on in. You can butter the bread, or something. Ranger, Dad's waiting in his office for you."

Jim Hatfield followed the two young people inside and found Doc McGraw lifting a big brown bottle from a glass-enclosed shelf. Doc's white-clad figure, with its bristly halo of white hair, looked sturdy and clean and competent. Doc was a comfortable kind of man, Hatfield thought. He felt the warm pull of beginning friendship.

"Set, Hatfield," Doc invited. "And name your poison."

Hatfield reversed a straight-backed kitchen chair and straddled it. "Nothing to drink, thanks. How'd you know my name?"

"From Foreman." Doc McGraw waddled to his swivel chair and sank down with a sigh. He hoisted the big brown bottle by the neck. "Sure you won't have a nip? Dandelion wine."

"Uh-uh." Hatfield peered at the bottle, grinning. "The label says calomel."

Doc McGraw grunted. "I get lots of snake bite patients. You can't trust a snake bite patient with a bottle of wine laying around." Doc's lips twitched. "But nobody ever stole a drink of calomel."

Hatfield threw back his head and laughed. "Wine's a cure for snake bite, is it?"

"No, sir." Doc McGraw splashed liquid into a glass. "Wine never cured anything, except a bad disposition. Which is why I drink it."

The doctor sipped contentedly. He had thoughtful blue eyes. He set the glass down, smacked his lips, and rubbed his palm across his bald head.

Jim Hatfield crossed his forearms over the back of the kitchen chair.

"So you're after the Colonel?" Doc McGraw said finally.

Hatfield nodded.

"I treated his wife, when she died. I brought Martha Ames into this world." Doc McGraw fiddled with the brown calomel bottle. "The Colonel's a good old man, Hatfield."

Hatfield rested his chin on crossed forearms. "I know."

"He built this country. Settled here before the first windmill. Fought Indians, some."

Hatfield said quietly, "Uh-huh."

Doc McGraw stared at the calomel bottle. "The hell of it is, the Colonel really believes he's some special breed of man. He reads about his ancestors, and he remembers when his dad was rich and powerful. The Colonel wants to be a dictator, Hatfield. A benevolent dictator."

Hatfield said, "You're right, Doc."

"What the hell can we do?"

"Doc," Hatfield said, "I'm here to change the Colonel's mind. To make him pay for all the damage he's caused. But I don't aim to arrest him—unless I have to."

Doc McGraw breathed, "Thank God!"

RISING, Hatfield jangled his spurs across the floor to stand by Doc's window. Outside, the sun-heated street had partially emptied as the lunch hour approached. Martha Ames' horse patiently switched flies at the peeled hitch-rail before the hotel. Beyond, four men emerged from the unpainted courthouse and entered the hotel dining room.

"Doc," the Ranger said, "I understand the election returns were faked."

Doc McGraw lowered his wine glass. "You think that'll help you?"

"Maybe. Just how were they faked?"

Doc McGraw grunted and propped small, black-shod feet on his desk.

"Sand County was organized only a year ago. So this election was the first we had. The Colonel, being a former senator, was naturally put in charge by the bigwigs down at Austin. He was chairman and secretary of the county election board." Doc stuck up three stubby fingers. "Here's how he did it. First—" Doc pulled down one finger—"he set up only four voting precincts in the whole county. You can do that, you know, when the population's thin. That put the election in the hands of just a few men." Doc drew down another finger. "Second, he bribed the ballot counters at those four precincts. I can't prove that, Hatfield, but I know it must be so."

Doc dropped his hand and reached for his wine glass. His face wrinkled with discouragement.

"And third," he went on then, "the ballots were lost. The stage carrying the boxes to Austin overturned in the river, right where the road goes past the Colonel's house. So I reckon we never will get proof of fraud now, with the ballots missing."

Doc McGraw scrubbed his bald head. He stared at his wine glass a moment, then drank. "The Colonel's smart, damn him!"

Hatfield nodded. "But not smart enough, Doc. How many counters were there?"

"Three to a precinct. That makes twelve."

"You can't bribe twelve men," Hatfield said, "without some of 'em talking. That's my job — to find one who'll tell the truth." He rubbed his jaw, regarded Doc

McGraw soberly. "You don't suppose the Colonel'd threaten those men? Maybe send gun-slingers to keep 'em quiet?"

Doc McGraw shook his head. "Both of us know the Colonel better than that, Hatfield. There's been no bloodshed. I don't think there will be."

"There hadn't better," Hatfield said grimly. "There's two kinds of crime, Doc. Crimes against property, and crimes against life. So far, the Colonel's stuck to crimes against property. If he keeps it that way, I'll try to help him. But once a crime against life's committed, I can't side-step my duty. Nothing on earth can save the Colonel, then."

A group of school children skipped up the boardwalk as Hatfield emerged from Doc McGraw's house. They were laughing and calling. Two boys were playing running catch with an old rubber ball. Hatfield stepped aside with a smile, realizing they were homeward bound for their dinners. The thought brought hunger to his own lean body. He crossed the street to the hotel dining room, boot heels dragging sand.

The dining room was a hot, cramped place, dotted with tables with red-checkered cloths. Two harried waitresses scurried about with armloads of steaming plates. Most of the tables were occupied by loud-voiced men—lawyers and merchants by their garb. But in a corner, Hatfield saw Martha Ames poking listlessly at a tomato salad.

HE THREADED toward her, hat in hand. "Howdy, ma'am. Can a hungry lawdog set?"

She looked up with a start. "Oh, Jim! Of course." Smiling, she shifted her water glass to make room. "I thought you'd eat at McGraw's."

"Nope." Hatfield dropped into a seat and gave his order to the perspiring waitress. "George Tree is, though. Helen invited him."

"Yes. I saw his stallion there."

Hatfield tossed his hat into an empty chair and regarded her closely. She looked pale. She hadn't eaten her salad, he noticed. He waited until the waitress brought his own food—a thick steak with mashed potatoes and cabbage and sliced tomatoes. Then he said quietly:

"Martha, brooding won't help."

She lifted her head quickly. Moisture brightened her eyes.

"Jim, I—don't know what to do."

Hatfield sliced into his steak. "Look. Stop worrying. Helen McGraw's your friend. She isn't setting her cap for George."

"I know. It isn't that. It's—." Angrily she blinked at her tears. "Darn it, Jim! I'm a weepy little idiot."

"Go ahead and weep, if you want." Hatfield speared a bite of steak. "What happened between you and George, last night?"

She dabbed her eyes with the corners of her napkin, then forced a wan smile.

"Well—he kissed me." Pink tinted her cheeks. "It's the first time he ever did. He's a—a bashful sort, you know."

Hatfield smiled. "I can imagine."

A hint of amusement touched her lips. "He was kind of clumsy. But he meant it." Sobering, she toyed with her fork. "Then we got in that argument. About—about Dad. About those awful things they're saying." She pinned him with her eyes. "Jim, I'm not asking why you're here, what your business is. I don't even care what Dad's done or hasn't done. He's my father, and I love him." Her lip quivered. "Dad might make mistakes, but he's good. Good and gentle. He wouldn't hurt anybody—not really hurt them."

"You're right, Martha," Hatfield said quietly.

"But George doesn't believe that." Bitterly she shrugged. "What could I do, Jim? When the—the man you love speaks so cruelly of your own father—"

Hatfield soberly cut another piece of steak. "So you really love him?"

She nodded, eyes on her plate.

Deep red stained her face to the roots of her blonde hair. "I—I think so."

"Then it's simple," Hatfield said. "You love each other, but George is too bullheaded to admit it and propose to you. So

you'll have to do the proposing, Martha." He smiled encouragement.

CHAPTER VII

Surly Lawman

MARTHA didn't move, even when the waitress spilled water on the tablecloth at Martha's elbow and wiped it up, with an apology. Slowly Martha's face regained its normal color and she brought herself down to reality with obvious effort.

"Jim," she said, "quit joshing."

Hatfield grinned over a forkful of mashed potatoes. "I ain't. Look. You told me this morning how old-fashioned your pa is. Well, are you old-fashioned, too?"

"No." Chin in hand, she studied him. "But, Jim—"

"What's wrong with a girl proposing?"

"I don't know. It just doesn't seem proper."

Hatfield said drily, "If it ain't, it ought to be."

Martha sat straighter in her chair. Her eyes began to glow. She clenched her small white fist on the tablecloth. "Of course, Jim! A girl in love's got the same rights as a man!"

Hatfield nodded. "Sure." And then he rubbed his jaw and said with wry humor, "Your pa'll raise hob with me now."

"Jim, I *could* do it!" Martha twisted her lithe body. Her face shone with an odd radiance. "He can't do worse than say no." She jumped to her feet. "Listen! I—I'm going over to Helen's now. Before I lose my nerve."

"Wait a minute." Hatfield smiled at her eagerness. "Martha, I don't know much about these things, but hadn't you ought to catch George alone some place? If Helen and Doc are there, it might be kind of awkward."

"Oh," Martha said. "Yes, of course." She sat down, flushing. "I'm too eager." She reached across the table and caught one of Hatfield's big hands in hers, rubbing at his knuckles with small, hot fingers. "Jim," she said, "you're a real gentleman."

Hatfield said, "Sure am, Martha." He let her clasp his hand a minute, let her fingers cling. He felt his own eyes sting a little. He hoped George Tree would always treasure this girl, for he knew she was impulsive and loving and brave. Then he grinned. "You're dragging my sleeve in the gravy."

"Oh, Jim!" With a laugh she released him. She dabbed his sleeve with a napkin. Then she peered at him accusingly. "Jim, you fool. I wasn't. You made that up—so I'd turn loose." Her eyes rounded. "You just can't stand sentiment."

To his own surprise, Hatfield turned pink. "Could be. It ain't my usual line of business."

She tipped her head and watched him with clear, amused eyes. "And yet—the way you tried to help me—Jim, you *are* sentimental, really. As silly as an old maid. Only you won't admit it."

Hatfield cut into the last of his steak. He knew that in her sudden happiness she was teasing him. But he couldn't stop the warmth on his neck. "Martha," he said, "cut it out."

Her eyes still smiled, but a tender curve sweetened her lips. She shook her head. "No, Jim." She took his hand again and kept it. She rubbed his knuckles. Her voice went deeply serious. "You see, I'm not a fool. I know why you're here."

He put a quick gaze on her. "Do you?"

She nodded. "You're here to save my dad. Not to send him to jail."

Hatfield laid down his fork. Gravely he leaned toward her, elbow on the red-checkered tablecloth.

"Martha," he said, "thank you."

The amusement had completely left her now. She returned his gaze steadily, not blinking.

"Can I help?" she asked quietly.

"Maybe. I need a list of the precinct officials at the last election."

"It's on file at the courthouse," she

said. Then she rose. She smiled again. Her eyes shone brilliantly. "I'm going to plan my campaign. I've got to get George away from McGraw's. Wish me luck."

Hatfield said, "The best."

She hesitated beside him, good humor bubbling in her. "Want me to say a word to Helen for you?"

"Gal," Hatfield said, "if you don't quit it, I'll spank you where you ain't been spanked for years."

She studied him, nibbling her lip. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" He half-rose and stretched a big hand for her. She skipped nimbly away. She ran from the dining room, laughing. . . .

LIKE the county itself, the Redbank courthouse was new. Its unpainted floors were still the yellow of fresh-cut pine. But already the place reeked of tobacco smoke and humanity and that odd, musty smell of old papers that Hatfield identified with courthouses all over Texas.

He strolled down the hall to the sheriff's office. In his day, Hatfield had met dishonest lawmen, and he was always intrigued by these strange men who could forfeit public trust for dollars. It was a sign of mental adolescence, Hatfield believed. Such men had never grown up.

The sign over the door read:

SHERIFF EDWARD DALEY

Hatfield pushed into the rank scent of pipe smoke. A fat man peered up from a desk. The fat man had a curved-stemmed pipe in his mouth and a spur in his hand.

Hatfield said genially, "Hi! You Daley?"

"Yeah." The fat man kept on polishing the spur with a bit of rag. The curved pipe rested against his chin.

Hatfield said, "I'm Jim Hatfield. Ranger."

"That so?" There was deliberate insult in the way Sheriff Ed Daley blew on the silvered shank of the spur, then polished it, then held it to the light. Hatfield felt his neck begin to burn.

"Sheriff," he said thinly, "I came for a little help."

The fat sheriff lifted the pipe from his mouth and rested it against a dusty stack of reward dodgers. He studied Hatfield, his eyes ranging up and down Hatfield's long frame. He took his time about it.

"Did you?" he said at last.

Jim Hatfield throttled an urge to slap the fat face. He made a mental note that Sheriff Ed Daley would regret this. He kept his voice calm.

"I need a list of the precinct officials at your election."

"Don't say?" The fat sheriff hooked his boot heel against the desk top and buckled on the spur. His knee pushed into his soft belly, producing a grunt. "What you need the list for?"

Hatfield said grimly, "To prove you were elected by fraud."

The sheriff dropped his boot. It slapped the wooden floor sharply.

"I heard you were snoopin' around,

[*Turn page*]

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Ranger. Stirring up trouble."

"Did you?"

"Yeah! We don't need you here." The sheriff knocked smoking pipe ash into his palm and tossed the mess through the open window.

"Daley," Hatfield said, "how much does the Colonel pay you?"

Daley's eyes seemed to sink inward. "He pays his taxes. Part of that goes into my salary." The sheriff grinned. "That's what you mean, ain't it, Ranger?"

"Not exactly." Uninvited, Hatfield kicked forward a chair and seated himself before the sheriff's desk. "How about that list now? You want to dig it up for me?"

"Naw. There's no statute says I got to, is there?"

"I wouldn't know," Hatfield said. "I figured you'd be glad to help a fellow lawman."

SHERIFF Ed Daley's lips thinned. "Figure it again."

"All right." Jim Hatfield yawned. He lifted his boots to the sheriff's desk. He tilted the chair and hit the back of his hat brim with the edge of his palm, tipping it over his eyes. "I'll loaf around a while, Sheriff."

"Like hell you will!" Daley pushed his heavy body to his feet. "Get out of here, Ranger. I got work to do."

"Have you? Fine. I'd like to see you operate." Hatfield smiled easily. "Get many complaints about damaged property, do you? Windmills and such? I'll ride along on your next investigation. Maybe if you have trouble reading sign, I can help." Hatfield assumed a noble look. "Nothing pickey about me, Sheriff. When I see a chance to help a fellow lawman—."

"All *right*, damn it!" Sheriff Ed Daley stamped to the door. He chewed his empty pipe; his little eyes glittered. "Come on, mister. I'll find your blamed list!"

Grinning, Hatfield rose and followed the waddling sheriff down the hall. He knew that the fat man welcomed a close investigation of his operations about like he'd welcome a rattlesnake in bed. The sheriff clumped into the county clerk's office and emerged a moment later with a paper containing twelve names.

"Here," he grunted. "Now get out of my courthouse."

Hatfield folded the list into his shirt pocket. "*Your* courthouse, Sheriff?"

The sheriff bit his lip. "Ranger," he said, "don't you reckon this county's a mite unhealthy for you? We've had a spell of sickness lately."

Hatfield said, "Lead sickness?"

The fat sheriff nodded gravely.

Hatfield said, "I'll think it over. Thanks for the warning."

The sheriff said, "It's free."

Hatfield threaded downstreet through the heat of early afternoon. He had a list of twelve names now. In that group he must find one man he could break.

Sweat collected around his waist and under his gun-belt as he walked. He admitted a sense of uncomfortable urgency. After a half-day of tasting the county's temper, he knew that time was ribboning out. Honest ranchers like George Tree were losing patience. Hatfield had seen enough explosive situations to know that violence hung over this wind-burnt land. Only quick action would save the Colonel from his folly.

A twisting dust devil kicked sand from the alleys and flung it against his shirt as he turned into the Red Rooster Saloon. Not ordinarily a drinking man, Hatfield nevertheless knew the value of saloons as gossip centers and sources of information.

He strode to the bar with jangling spurs and ordered a beer.

CHAPTER VIII

"Get Out of Town"

THE barkeep was thin and dark, in his middle thirties, with surprisingly curly hair. He wore a white shirt with

rolled-up sleeves and a black bow tie. He slid the beer along the polished bar with the careless ease of an expert and said, "Welcome to the Red Rooster, Ranger."

Hatfield waved thanks and sipped the beer. It was cold and dry tasting. He nodded. "Better'n average, friend."

The barkeep grinned his satisfaction. "Ought to be. I spent two weeks last winter cutting ice to keep it cold."

"You deserve my business, then." Hatfield fished the list of names from his shirt pocket. "Look. I want to find some people. Know 'em?"

The barkeep reached for the list with the instinctive curiosity common to his trade. Turning, Hatfield hooked his elbows over the curved bar edge, seizing the interval to study the place.

The Red Rooster was smallish, not much bigger than an ordinary parlor. Clean sawdust covered the floor. The saloon was better lighted than most; the scents were pleasanter. Instead of sour beer and stale cigars and sweat, Hatfield found himself sniffing the woody sawdust fragrance.

Three men stood at the far end of the bar. They held their eyes on Hatfield. They wore ragged buckskin breeches, leather moccasins, and soiled denim shirts. Each man had a tangled beard. With the beards and the buckskin breeches, they looked enough alike to be brothers. Even their guns were the same—long Sharpes buffalo rifles.

Hatfield remembered what George Tree had told him about the six buffalo hunters with whom Lyle Foreman associated. So these men, he thought, were a sample of the Colonel's mysterious hirelings. He raised his beer glass and said, "Afternoon, boys," and turned back to the barkeep.

The barkeep poked the list with his finger.

"These here's the people that counted ballots in the election, ain't they?"

"That's right. You know 'em?"

The barkeep touched his lips with his tongue. "Sure. But look here, Ranger. I don't want to get mixed up—"

Hatfield lifted his hand mildly. "Just tell me where to find 'em. That's all I want."

"Well." The barkeep rubbed his nose. "Four of 'em are punchers for Colonel Ames. You'll find them at his ranch, I reckon." The barkeep wagged his thumb toward the three buffalo hunters. "And there's three of 'em, right there."

Hatfield said, "Oh?" and glanced up at the three. They still scowled at him blackly. He grinned at the barkeep. "Keep the paper for me, friend."

He picked up his beer glass and strolled down the bar.

The three buffalo hunters backed from the bar as Hatfield approached, dragging their long guns by the muzzles. The gunbutts raked grooves in the sawdust. Hatfield paid no attention. He fixed a friendly smile on his face.

When he halted and clinked his beer glass to the bartop, the three moved ominously in. They stood close, surrounding him. Hatfield eased his back ribs against the bar.

"Cozy this way, ain't it, boys?"

None of the three smiled. In the midst of them now, Hatfield caught their scent—the rank odor of unwashed clothes, camp smoke, and horses.

Hatfield said, "I wanted to ask you boys some questions."

The biggest of the three grinned. It was a strange contortion of red lips in black, tangled beard.

"We want to ask you some, Ranger. First."

Hatfield shrugged. "All right. I got time."

"Good. If you didn't, we'd help you take time."

"Would you, now?" Hatfield asked quietly.

"Don't think we couldn't." Black Beard hitched at his buckskin breeches. "Mister, somebody broke Lyle Foreman's arm this morning. We heard it was a Texas Ranger. And you're the only one around."

HATFIELD hooked his boot heel into the brass foot rail. "If that's your

question, the answer's yes. I broke Foreman's arm." He rubbed his chin. "Anything else you want to ask?"

"No," the hunter said. "Nothing we want to *ask*."

"All right. Now I'll do a little talking. You boys were precinct officials at the last election. Weren't you?"

The hunter pulled his rifle barrel up against his chest. "Ranger, you better git out of town."

Hatfield said, "You boys cheated on the counting. So as to elect Ed Daley sheriff. It'll go easier for you if you admit it now."

A network of tiny veins spread red over the hunter's hairy cheeks.

"You can have five minutes. After that, if you're in town—." The man laid his rifle in the angle of his elbow. He crooked a dirty-nailed thumb over the hammer.

Jim Hatfield only grinned. He heard a light, nervous step behind the bar, then the barkeep's unnatural voice.

"Gents, I just bought a forty-dollar mirror. If you'll be so good as to step outside, the drinks you've had are on the house. But I got a lot of valuable property in here, gents, and—"

Hatfield interrupted, not turning his head. "Forget it, Curly. My friends are only playing poker."

"You think so?" The big hunter dogged back his rifle hammer. It made a steely, rasping noise. The other two stirred at Hatfield's sides. "Maybe you don't want five minutes, eh?"

"Boys," Hatfield said, "I'm sorry. But I'll have—"

He exploded in action.

The basis of it was Hatfield's heel, which he had hooked into the brass footrail. It gave him an unsuspected leverage. He straightened the bent knee, at the same time pushing with the flat of his hands on the bar top, hoisting himself to a sitting position on the bar. He was as fast and as agile as a cat.

Before the three hunters could do more than blink, Hatfield drew his feet together and kicked.

His heels caught the big man with the cocked rifle in the face, driving him to the floor. Hatfield heard the moan of pain, and he rolled on his shoulder, dropping off the back of the bar to the slatted walkway there. He sensed the curly-headed barkeep scuttling away on hands and knees, and he drew his two Colts and popped his head over the bar and anchored the two still-gawking hunters in his sights.

"Be good, boys," Hatfield said, grinning. "Or I'll slap your wrists with a ruler."

After a moment, the two hunters dropped their guns and hauled their bleeding companion to his feet. Supporting him, they stared at Hatfield with slack jaws and awe-struck faces. Hatfield kept on grinning. He moved around the bar, picked up the three rifles, emptied them, and tossed the cartridges casually into a brass cuspidor.

"Boys," he said, "If you want a return engagement, this Texas Ranger will be happy to oblige."

He stepped to the batwing doors and threw the rifles outside into the sand.

The big hunter wiped blood from his furred cheeks and probed his nose with a gentle forefinger. His eyes reminded Hatfield vaguely of a wild peccary.

"Ranger," the hunter croaked, "you're a walking dead man."

"Go home," Hatfield said, "and put some iodine on those cuts. If you can stand the pain . . . "

THE barkeep couldn't get over it. He kept emptying Hatfield's glass and refilling it with cold beer from the iced keg. After a while his hands stopped shaking. He didn't glance so often or so apprehensively at his forty-dollar mirror. But he couldn't keep the humble hero-worship out of his eyes.

"Ranger," he said, "I watched bar fights fifteen years. And if ever anything topped that—"

Hatfield was amused and embarrassed. "It's all in a day's work. "

The barkeep's head shake flapped his curly hair. "Not with them hombres.

Even Sheriff Daley treats 'em nice." Abruptly the barkeep dropped his voice, although the saloon was empty. His thin face quivered. "Look here, Ranger. I was sort of scared before—I admit it. It ain't too safe to talk in this town. But after I seen you in action — Hell, man, you mean business! I—I'll help you!"

Hatfield said gravely, "Thanks, Curly. But I don't see how you could. Except to tell me where to find the men on that list."

The barkeep pulled a clean towel from under the bar and wiped his face. He didn't look happy. "My name's on that list. You'll find it. Chuck Baxter." He grinned. "Some folks call me Curly. Some call me Handsome."

"Oh?" Jim Hatfied stared at the man, not quite believing this for a minute. Then, reading the intense seriousness of Curly Baxter behind the nervous grin, he relaxed and stuck out his hand.

"Glad to know you, Curly. I sure didn't figure you for an election official. But I'm glad you were. And I'm glad you're on my side of the fence."

Curly Baxter returned the handshake and swabbed his neck with the towel. "I didn't ask for the job. I reckon they picked me because them buffalo hunters drink here a lot. Along with that Lyle Foreman—the hombre they said you broke his arm."

Curly Baxter began to sweat. He kept wiping his face with the towel. "Well, the whole crew came in here one day and asked me how I'd like to count votes. Said it'd pay three dollars. I had to close the saloon election day anyhow. I couldn't see nothing wrong with it, so I went over, come the election."

Baxter's lips looked oddly stiff. "That evening, time to close the polls, they told me to go on home. Said they didn't need me no more. I told 'em I was getting paid to count votes, and I ought to count 'em. But they—they laughed and pushed me out the door and told me to keep my mouth shut."

The barkeep laid down the towel. His eyes lifted haggardly to Hatfield's. "I ain't a brave man, Ranger. I left. And when I got my pay from the county, I kept it. You reckon I ought to give the three dollars back?"

Jim Hatfield shook his head. He heard the afternoon stage sweep down street, the beat of twenty-four hoofs vibrating the bar top under his fingers. He made little wet circles on the bar with his glass.

"Curly," he said, "they didn't pay you a bribe?"

"No."

"All right. Will you go with me to Colonel Ames? And tell him what you told me?"

"You bet, Ranger. Soon as my night relief comes on." Curly Baxter tossed his towel behind the bar. He had stopped sweating. . . .

The wind died again at sunset. The land assumed an odd, deceptive tranquility. Hoofbeats sounded muffled in the sand. Shadows stretched like long blue fingers, grotesque distortions of reality. And suddenly, it was cool.

JIM HATFIELD felt the coolness strike through his shirt as he jog-trotted Goldy down the road beside Curly Baxter. Goldy whickered; a little extra energy flowed into the yellow gelding's flawless body. Hatfield grinned at Curly.

"We're most to the Colonel's line fence."

Curly Baxter nodded grimly, holding his eyes on the road ahead. The barkeep was not a good rider. Even on the gentle livery horse he bounced slackly in saddle, one fist clutching the saddle-horn, teeth clenched painfully. Watching the little man, Hatfield experienced a moment's deep outswelling of respect for Curly Baxter. Fate had thrust Curly into a game he didn't like or understand, but he was playing it the best he could.

That was more than you could say of many men, Hatfield thought. Colonel Jonathon Ames, for instance. The Colonel boasted more natural advantages than Curly—wealth, intelligence, an expert's knowledge of the cow business. Yet the Colonel's overweening ambition had

thrust him into deep trouble.

It came to Hatfield that the advantages a man was born with didn't matter. It was what he did with what he had that counted.

CHAPTER IX

The Feudalist

AT THE barbed wire gate, Hatfield dismounted and led the horses through. Curly Baxter turned worried eyes on him.

"You think this'll do any good, Jim? You think the Colonel'll pay us any mind?"

Hatfield shrugged. "We'll try, Curly."

The question stayed with him as he mounted and guided Curly carefully through the prairie dog town, threading between the holes. Hatfield gnawed at the knowledge that while Curly's story might prove election fraud, it didn't prove the Colonel's guilt in that fraud. If the Colonel wanted to bluff his way out, he could likely do so.

Hatfield hoped the Colonel wouldn't bluff. The game was nearly up. He hoped the Colonel would admit it in time for Hatfield to save the pieces. It was possible. But he could not be sure.

The Colonel's big house loomed into view presently, a high cube of white etched by reflected sunset against the dark, green, tree-lined river. The peak of the house stood high enough to catch the sun's last rays; the galvanized ridge row sparkled.

The grounds teemed with evening activity. In the back yard, Wong was picking a chicken for tomorrow's dinner. A few white feathers drifted vagrantly about. Two punchers were doctoring a screw-wormed calf in the pens. Hatfield heard the piercing bawl of its anxious mother. From the bunkhouse boomed hoarse masculine laughter. A card game was in progress there.

Hatfield grinned at Curly Baxter. "Looks peaceful, Curly. And I think it is. The Colonel's punchers are mostly honest men. He hires outside help for his real dirty work."

They tied up at the hitch-rail beside the picket fence. The Colonel sat with his feet on the front porch railing, smoking an after-supper cigar. He greeted them cheerfully.

"You missed supper, Jim. Bring your friend up. Want me to have Wong fix a bite?"

"We ate in town, Colonel." Hatfield took Curly's elbow and steered him up the porch. "You know Curly Baxter, I reckon. We want to talk a mite."

"Howdy, Baxter." The Colonel waved his cigar genially. "Pull up some chairs."

Hatfield shook his head. "In the library, Colonel."

At the gravity of Hatfield's tone, Colonel Ames rammed the cigar between his teeth and scowled. "Jim, are you still nursin' that damnfool idea—"

"Colonel," Hatfield interrupted, "take my word. It'd be better in the library."

The Colonel's pinched eyes bored at Hatfield's face. He grunted, "Come on, durn it."

Hatfield followed Curly, and Curly followed the Colonel. Grumbling, the Colonel hobbled down the hall and into the dim-lit library. He touched a match to a lamp. Books sprang out from the walls as the light flickered. Over the mantel, the oil painting of the old plantation took on subdued color. And the Colonel's coat of arms became a vivid splash of red and gold against the wallpaper.

The Colonel slacked into his leather chair, sighed, and yanked at his boot heels.

"Why is it a man thinks better with his boots off, Jim?"

Hatfield didn't smile. He tossed his hat to the mantel. He stood looking soberly down at the old man, framing his words.

"Colonel," he said, "I've got the proof."

Colonel Ames' mustache twitched. "Horse feathers," he said, and set his empty boots on the floor.

Hatfield shrugged. He nodded at Curly

and smiled to encourage him.

"Tell him, Curly."

BLUSHING nervously, Curly Baxter began to talk. He told how the buffalo hunters and Lyle Foreman had persuaded him to act as an election official, then prevented him by force from actually counting votes.

"If the votes were counted," Curly concluded, his eyes round with seriousness, "I didn't do it, Colonel. Them hunters and Lyle Foreman could've faked the returns any which way."

tail up about something that ain't so. I'm a peaceful, law-abiding citizen."

The Colonel grinned.

The grin touched off a spark in Hatfield. He moved forward, anger lashing blood to his cheeks.

"Colonel," he said grimly, "you make it tough. You think you're so damned much smarter than you are."

The Colonel kept on grinning irritatingly. "If it came to it, Jim, I could outsmart you any day in the week. Mind, I said if." The Colonel hobbled on his stockinged feet over to the mantel. Suddenly

TOPS AND BOTTOMS

IT IS INTERESTING to note that Texas is "bottoms" as well as "tops." The deepest hole in the world is located there. It is a 15,279-foot oil well in Pecos County. And the most elevated highway bridge in existence crosses the Neches, near Port Arthur.

Texas not only has more oil, cotton, onions, goats, and turkeys than any other state, but more movie stars come from this state than any other. 172 generals and 11 admirals of World War II came from this state also.

But perhaps the bigness of the country can best be illustrated by pointing out that the distance between El Paso, Texas, and Beaumont, Texas, is greater than the distance from New York City to Chicago!

—*Mark Knight*

The Colonel had listened with beady eyes, holding his cigar between thumb and forefinger. Now he snorted.

"What's this got to do with me, Jim? You haven't proved a damned thing, except that Baxter, here, took the county's pay for a job he didn't do. If you're hunting crooks, he's your man. Not me."

Gravely Jim Hatfield shook his head. "It's got plenty to do with you, Colonel. And I can prove it. I can get one of those hunters and break him, if I have to. Or Foreman. I can make them tell the truth —that you're behind all this. I'd hoped I wouldn't have to." Hatfield fixed his gray eyes on the old man. "Like I told you. I don't want to send you to jail. I'm trying to be your friend."

The Colonel sucked his cigar. "You are my friend, Jim. But you've got your

energetic, he poked his cigar at the coat of arms. "See that, Jim?" Then the Colonel pointed at the oil painting of his plantation home. "And that? You see 'em?"

Hatfield said bleakly, "I see 'em."

"Jim,"—the Colonel spoke more gravely now— "I like my friends to understand me. I'm going to tell you about myself."

The old man looked thoughtfully at his cigar, as if seeking words in the coiling smoke. When he glanced back, utter seriousness lay in his eyes.

"Most men," the Colonel said, "are ignorant. Jim, the average man is a follower, not a leader. He can't plan his own destiny; he's a drifter. Life makes him, instead of him making life." The Colonel paused. His jaw swelled. "But I'm different. I've got an education. I've got

ability. I've got a history of ancestors who were leaders. I'm not bragging, Jim. I'm telling you facts."

Jim Hatfield didn't say anything. He kept his gray eyes nailed to the Colonel's face.

"You know about feudalism?" the Colonel asked. "How the lord of the manor held the land and rented it out? That was a good life, Jim. Good for the lord, and good for the peasant. Because the peasant had security. His lord paid his doctor bills, sent his children to school, held court for him, and fed him if he was starving." The Colonel jammed his cigar into his mouth. "Who'll feed these homesteaders, when they starve?"

Jim Hatfield said quietly, "You aim to feed 'em, eh? First wreck 'em, then feed 'em?"

The Colonel ignored that. He was astride a vision. His eyes shone. "Jim, I was raised on a plantation. Now, I'm not defending slavery, understand. But I do know the slaves on my dad's place were happy. They worked, but they were well-fed, well-clothed, and they had all the comforts of the time. The old folks were retired, and the babies went to school."

THE Colonel began to pace the floor. His stockinged feet whispered on the carpet. His sturdy face was flushed bright pink.

"Jim," he said, "a good master can do more for most men than they can do for themselves. That's what I believe. Now, is it wrong?"

Jim Hatfield dropped into an easy chair and hooked his knee up over its upholstered arm. He vaguely sensed Curly Baxter staring at Colonel Ames with his mouth open and great horizontal wrinkles of awe on his forehead. Hatfield rubbed an absent fingernail on the smooth leather of his chaps. The library wall clock ticked loudly.

"Colonel," Hatfield said, "you got a kink in your mind."

The Colonel's disgusted snort echoed in the book-lined room. "I've got the best mind in the Panhandle."

"Maybe," Hatfield said. "But it's got a kink. You've let your mind make a fool of you."

He pulled his leg down and cocked a forefinger at the old man. "You *want* to believe that foolishment. It satisfies your pride. It tickles you to imagine yourself telling other men how to live. It makes you seem important."

"Bosh!" the Colonel grunted. But blood drained from his face.

Hatfield pushed from the chair. He stood taller than the Colonel. "That's why you're trying to wreck the county. So you can tell other men what to do. So you can be the boss." He felt his own mouth curl in scorn.

"Hell, Colonel, the smallest gun-thug in Texas has the same damnfool notions. He thinks *he's* better'n other men. Just like you do."

The muscles over Colonel Ames' mouth pinched in, drawing his mustaches into a sturdier, narrower shape. "Jim," he said, "That's a hell of a stupid attitude."

Hatfield said, "Are you ready to call the game quits now, Colonel?"

The Colonel flung his cigar into the fireplace with an angry motion. "Jim, I never thought you'd turn on me this way. What in blazes is wrong with you? You ain't stupid."

"Colonel," Hatfield said grimly, "it's time to throw in the sponge."

"Or maybe you are," the Colonel said. "Maybe you're dumber than I thought, Jim."

Hatfield stood a moment, eyes locked with the Colonel's, seeing the implacable stubbornness there. The Colonel's eyes were bright and hard and unwavering. Slowly Jim Hatfield felt the muscles all over his body sag.

"That's your answer?"

"You're still my friend," the Colonel said, "but you ain't very smart."

"All right, Colonel." Hatfield took his hat from the mantel and rammed it on his head. His gray eyes had a blue glint, like gun steel.

"Curly," he said, "let's go. We've wasted our time."

Curly Baxter blew a deep sighing breath as they shut the front door and crossed the porch in gathering darkness.

"Jim, I don't get it. Is he crazy?"

"A doctor wouldn't say so, Curly. But he's lived alone too long. He's read too many books."

Hatfield stalked off the porch and felt the coolness of the night strike his face. Pent-up feeling suddenly released itself. He whirled, clutched Curly Baxter roughly by the arm.

"Look here, Curly. Don't think too bad of the Colonel. He's my friend. He's done more for this county than—"

"I didn't say nothing." Curly Baxter's thin face whitened in the dusk. "What's wrong, Jim?"

HATFIELD caught himself then. Shrugging, he loosed Curly with a wry grin. "I'm sorry. Reckon I'm a little worked up."

"You've a right to be," Curly said gravely, and then they walked quietly together to the picket gate, beyond which the horses waited.

The grounds lay quiet now. Yellow light from the bunkhouse window threw a bright square on a section of nodding sagebrush. Down by the corrals, the penned calf bawled in discouragement. Hatfield latched the gate and untied Goldy's reins from the hitch-rail, wondering bleakly what his next step would be. He was swinging to saddle when the gunshot roared.

It was a harsh, racketing kind of roar, slamming concussion against Hatfield and then echoing off the enclosed porch of the big house. He caught the flash from the edges of his vision and, as Goldy snorted and began to rear, Hatfield hurled himself from the horse and struck dirt and rolled and banged against the picket fence.

He heard Curly Baxter's shriek of pain. The front door of the big house thudded open. The Colonel's anxious voice bellowed questions through the dusk. The bunkhouse door swung wide, casting light across him.

In the bunkhouse, Hatfield saw a puncher struggling into his breeches, and the weird feeling came that he had been through this before. He rolled out of the light as the punchers stampeded into the yard, and from off toward the river, drumming hoofbeats vibrated the earth under his fingertips.

He got to his feet and holstered his unused guns.

CHAPTER X

Blood—and Greed

CURLY BAXTER was moaning. Hatfield stepped to the man quickly. The little barkeep lay tangled beneath his horse's feet. The horse snorted nervously and tipped its ears at this alien thing beneath it.

"Get the critter off me, Jim," Curly groaned. "I can stand bullets, but I don't crave no horseshoes in my teeth."

Hatfield grinned in relief and caught the livery pony's reins and carefully jockeyed the excited animal away. When he turned back, the shouting cowhands had already grasped the situation and organized a party under the leadership of a mustached foreman to track down the ambusher.

Hatfield heard the foreman hurriedly splitting up the crowd into two groups. Colonel Ames came hobbling from the porch with a lantern, his mouth working as he stepped on pebbles in his stockinged feet.

The Colonel insisted on bringing Curly into the house. Hatfield laid the moaning barkeep on a sofa in the parlor and stripped off his trousers. The bullet was imbedded shallowly in Curly's narrow rump.

"You won't have to ride that horse home, Curly." Hatfield smiled. "Lucky you got a stand-up job. I'll fix you up for now, and we'll ride in to Doc McGraw's." Then he turned to the Colonel. "Got some bandages? And some kind

of disinfectant—iodine or whisky?"

The Colonel said hoarsely, "I'll get some whisky. Jim, I want you to know—"

"Get it!" Hatfield spoke curtly.

He hadn't time for anger yet, but he knew it would come. For directly or indirectly, this shooting was the Colonel's fault. Whether the old man had actually ordered the shot was a matter of no consequence. Blood had been spilled, blood that would not have been spilled except for the Colonel's greed.

Hatfield knew that a dividing line had been passed. Events had pushed the Colonel inexorably now to the wrong side of the law. Seeing the Colonel's trembling lips, Hatfield fought pity for his old friend. The Colonel's shoulders drooped as he turned away.

Hatfield doused whisky on Curly's naked rump, then bound the wound with the Colonel's bandages. When Curly got his breeches back on he stood up shakily and grinned.

"Think I'll walk back to town. A saddle wouldn't feel so good right now."

"We'll borrow the Colonel's buggy." Grimly Hatfield faced the Colonel. He felt a wrenching pain now, for he valued friendship. But he valued duty more. "Colonel," he said, "I'll pack and vamoose, too. I can't help you now." His lips thinned. "From here on, we're on opposite sides of the track."

Night blacked the prairie like the inside of a tent when Hatfield tooled the buggy to the picket gate and half-lifted Curly Baxter inside. Curly's face was a white blur. Hatfield caught Goldy and the livery horse, tied them to the rear of the buggy with clumsy fingers, and stepped up into the seat.

Curly had lugged a pillow from the big house. He sat now twisted sideways, favoring his wound. Hatfield heard Curly's labored breathing. The Colonel stood on the front porch watching, a stumpy silhouette. The bunkhouse windows were dark.

Hatfield said with odd reluctance, "Well, we'll move, Curly," and flicked the reins expertly.

THE buggy creaked off. The mare pulled them by some horse insinct through the blackness, making the turn at the picket fence and lining toward the prairie dog town and the gate beyond. Hatfield gave the mare her head. He rode silently, listening to the hoof falls of the three horses, the leatherish creak of the buggy, and a turtle dove's sleepy chirp somewhere in the sage. He thought Curly was asleep, but presently the little barkeep stirred in discomfort.

"Jim, who were they shooting at? You or me?"

Hatfield twisted the reins around his big fingers. It was a question he'd already asked himself.

"Could've been either of us, Curly."

"Maybe." Curly's voice deepened with grave thought. "But I'm the hombre they hit."

Hatfield nodded in the darkness. "Uh-huh. Likely some of them buffalo hunters saw us leaving town. They probably figured you'd told the truth about the election. They wanted to shut your mouth."

Curly was silent. The Colonel's mare jogged steadily, keeping her own pace. Hatfield didn't hurry her.

"Jim," Curly said, "I'm scared."

The buggy struck a sandy stretch. The mare slowed a little, bracing her body against the added pull. Hatfield flicked the reins.

"If you weren't, you wouldn't be human."

"Do you get scared, Jim? When somebody's trying to kill you?"

"You're danged right. Fear's a mighty healthy instinct, Curly."

Curly sighed gently. Hatfield felt the little man relax a little. He went on, "But you don't need to worry. I'm puttin' you in a safe place, soon as we get to town."

"Oh? Where?"

"Doc McGraw's house. He'll have to cut that slug out anyway. He can keep you out of sight till this blows over."

Oddly, he felt Curly tense again. The barkeep twisted on his pillow.

"Jim, couldn't you make it some place

else? I—well, damn it I kind of get embarrassed around Helen McGraw."

Hatfield grinned in surprise. "Do you? Kind of sweet on her, Curly?"

He sensed Curly's face redden. Curly's voice dipped low. "She never looked twice at me. I'm—well, Jim, I ain't the kind of hombre a girl takes to. I get kind of choked up, talking to her. And you know how I am. I don't ride a horse good. And I get scared pretty easy."

Hatfield said, "Maybe she'll change her mind, Curly, when she has a chance to know you. If you'd speak up—"

The flash of gunfire, off to the right, exploded like a stroke of lightning in its suddenness. And like lightning, it stamped a picture on Hatfield's mind even after it winked out. Behind the blooming burst of yellow light, he saw a hand holding a six-gun, and a pair of trousers. They were ragged buckskin trousers.

At the same moment the zip of a bullet cut through the canvas buggy top. Hatfield's hand snatched of its own will for the whip and laid out a stinging lash against the mare's rump.

The buggy lunged forward, snapping sharply at the reins of the two horses tied behind. Curly Baxter moaned low in panic. Another gunshot flowered into deadly beauty somewhere to the left, and Hatfield realized with a grinding sense of frustration that he'd run into a trap.

He said, "Watch your sore tail, Curly," and threw the buggy whip away and drew his left-hand gun.

IT WAS going to be a run, he knew. In this darkness, on this bold prairie, he could not stop and fight. Even a run would likely end them boxed against the Colonel's fence, but to run was the only slim, possible chance. So Hatfield slipped the reins into his teeth and drew the second gun. Fleetingly he wondered about Goldy and the livery horse tied behind.

Then a third shot flared yellow up ahead. A bullet kicked splinters into Hatfield's face from the buggy frame. He fired at the flash and heard a scram of pain. A horse floundered in the sage, thrashing the weedy stuff wildly. Hatfield heard the thrashing sound approach, pass, then vanish as the buggy hurtled onward.

For two or three seconds, then, there were no more alien noises except the mare's wheezing breath, the rusty squeal of the buggy as it skimmed the prairie, and the beat of one horse galloping alongside. Hatfield laid his gun on that sound, but before he fired he recognized the pattern of Goldy's hoofbeats.

He breathed easier, grinning around the reins in his mouth. Evidently Goldy had pulled off his bridle, which bore no throat latch. Listening, Hatfield thought he detected the jangle of the bit bouncing through the sage behind. He heard nothing of Curly's livery horse and concluded that animal had snapped off the reins and was wandering across the prairie.

He hoisted one gun, grasped the saliva-wet reins, and said, "You all right, Curly?"

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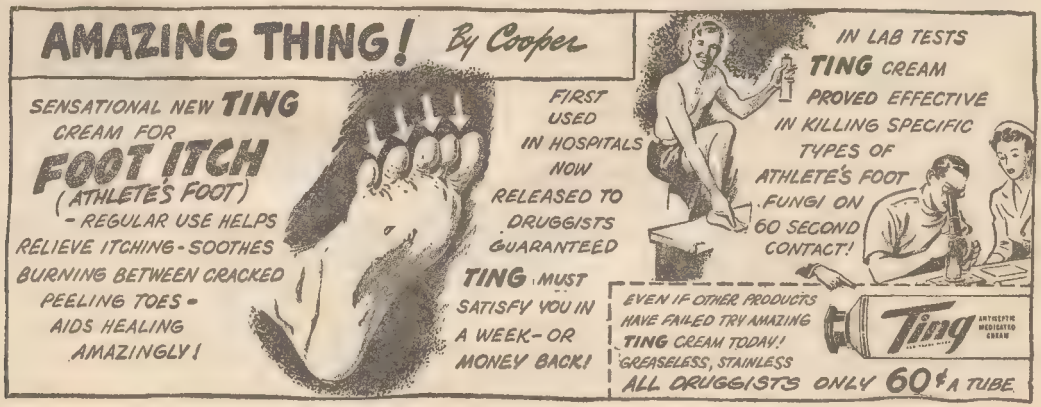
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Curly Baxter groaned bitterly. "I'm leakin' like a stuck pig, Jim. But I can spare the blood. Don't stop."

Hatfield grinned. "I don't aim to." And then, forehead wrinkled, he hunched suddenly over the reins. "I just had an idea. Hang on!"

He hauled sharply on the reins, pulling the laboring mare left. Behind now, the drum of hoofbeats thundered, and he hadn't much time. The bushwhacking riders would overtake the buggy within a minute or two. Hatfield juggled the mare on her course, feeling seconds tick away, staring into the black ahead. He clung to their location by feel. He moved the buggy in his mind across an imaginary map of the terrain. At the precise moment when his instinct clicked, he yanked the mare back sharply to the right.

Behind, a shout split the night as triumphant riders sliced across the curve to intercept them. Hatfield heard Curly mutter incoherently, and he knew that if he'd guessed wrong—

A horse screamed pitifully. A man yelped, and then the yelp pinched off as though the man's face had been suddenly thrust into dirt. Hatfield caught a brief awful picture in his imagination of a horse turning up on its head, breaking its neck. Then a faint shout from his pursuers drifted to him.

"Hold up, boys. The damned Ranger's led us into a prairie dog town!"

Hatfield relaxed against the buggy seat. Sweat streamed from his face and trickled in little rivulets down the curved surface of his ribs.

But he was smiling. . . .

The town, when they reached it at last, lay dark. Hatfield was glad of that, for he didn't want to see the Colonel's mare. The animal had raced its heart out in that last dead run from the Colonel's line fence down the road to safety.

Hatfield had been tempted to stop. But he couldn't be sure how long a delay the prairie dog town had caused, how many horses and men the treacherous holes had crippled. So he had punished the mare, hating doing it.

A BLOCK from Doc McGraw's house, he dismounted in an alley. Goldy came snuffling up to him. Hatfield raised his hand to the sorrel's mane, touched the sweat there, and said, "Sorry, Goldy. It was them or us. I'll make that run up to you with an extra bait of kaffir, tomorrow."

Then he went to the mare. Her head hung between the shafts; her coat was frothy with sweat-foam; she trembled violently. Hatfield stroked her nose a minute. His eyes stung. He had to wrench himself away.

"Let's go, Curly," he said quietly. "I'll get back to the horses, soon as you're fixed up."

Curly stumbled from loss of blood. Hatfield draped the barkeep's slender arm around his shoulder and supported him to Doc McGraw's door.

At his first soft knock, bed springs creaked inside Doc's dark house. Bare feet slapped a floor. A moment later, light flared.

Hatfield called in a low voice, "Douse the light, Doc. It's Hatfield."

Instantly the light winked out. The bare feet hesitated, then approached the door, making little shuffling sounds. Presently the door swung open. Hatfield glimpsed a vast, white figure.

"Come on in," Doc McGraw said. "Trouble?"

"Trouble, and a patient, Doc. You'll need light, but I don't want it to show on the street."

Doc McGraw grunted. "Kind of like the old days. Well, come on."

CHAPTER XI

Fully Protected

WITH blankets on the windows of the Doc's office, with a cheerful lamp lit, Jim Hatfield helped Curly Baxter crawl up on the white kitchen table. Doc McGraw stood by his desk in a white

nightshirt, pouring dandelion wine out of his calomel bottle. Helen McGraw, wearing a pale blue robe, had entered and stood by the door.

"Gunshot wound, eh?" Doc McGraw said, peering at Curly Baxter's gaunt face. "I can always tell. Man can't quite believe bullets hurt, till he gets one himself. Always a surprise." Doc lifted his wine glass.

Curly Baxter lay on his side on the table. His trousers were a mass of blood. Curly peered feverishly at Helen McGraw, then swung a pleading gaze on Hatfield.

"Jim, get her out of here."

Hatfield might have smiled, but he remembered what Curly had confided in the buggy. He kept his voice serious.

"Curly, she's Doc's nurse. He'll need her, I reckon."

Violently Curly Baxter shook his head. "No. I ain't going to—to take off my britches with her here."

Hatfield looked at Doc McGraw. Doc snorted.

"All right, Helen. Go back to bed. Hatfield and I can manage, I reckon."

Helen McGraw nodded. A suspicion of color touched her cheek-bones, but she was grave as she turned and left the room. Hatfield thought with admiration that she was as sensible a girl as he had ever known. Then, smiling cheerfully, he turned back to Curly Baxter.

"All right, Curly. You want a horseshoe nail to bite?"

When it was done, Jim Hatfield rolled and lit a cigarette for Curly. Curly leaned on his elbow and smoked the cigarette, the sweat gradually drying on his pale face. Doc washed his hands.

Hatfield said, "That's that. Now, Doc, I got a mare to see to. So I'll make this quick. I want you to keep Curly here a few days. Out of sight."

Doc McGraw dried the stiff white hair of his forearm. "They're after him?"

"Yes. The buffalo hunters, maybe Lyle Foreman and Sheriff Daley. Maybe even the Colonel. I don't know, yet."

Doc's white eyebrows lifted. "The Colonel gone off the track? I'd be sure of that, Hatfield."

Hatfield's jaw squared. "I will be, before long. Could be Foreman and the buffalo hunters are taking things into their own hands. But it don't much matter, for now. Main thing is to keep Curly safe."

Doc said, "It's done. I'll go tell Helen to make up the spare bed."

Doc waddled out of the room. Curly Baxter blinked worriedly at Hatfield.

"Jim, I don't like it. Living in the same house with Helen—"

Hatfield ruffed Curly's sweaty hair. "Curly, it's the chance you been waiting for."

Sadly Curly shook his head. "I could never screw up the nerve—"

Doc McGraw's bare feet, slapping the floor at a dead run, interrupted. Doc burst into the office with the tails of his nightshirt flying. He skidded across the floor and huffed out the lamp. Blackness swooped down.

"The sheriff," Doc whispered fiercely. "And two of them buffalo hunters. I saw 'em out the window, heading over here with lanterns. Git in Helen's room, both of you."

Hatfield felt his nerves tauten. He gripped Curly's elbow and heaved the little man to his feet. His brain spun rapidly, weighing and rejecting.

He heard Curly's stupid croak, "W-what, Doc?" and he put his hand on Curly's mouth and said quietly, "Doc's right, Curly. We'd best hide, till we see what they want."

ALREADY Doc McGraw was ripping blankets from the windows, restoring the office to order in the dark. Hatfield pulled Curly across the floor.

Curly's leg buckled under him once. The little barkeep choked off a cry of pain. Hatfield caught Curly as he fell and boosted him forward. In the black hall he paused a moment, confused by the strange interior. Then Helen McGraw's soft hand touched his. She drew him into a side room.

"Under this bed," she whispered. "Quickly."

Hatfield helped Curly settle to the floor. Curly wiggled under the bed, grunting. Hatfield followed.

Bedsprings creaked over his shoulder. With sudden, fierce self-disgust, he realized that this was Helen's bed, that he was letting a woman shield him. He felt himself redden to the ears.

A knock thundered from the front of the house.

It was repeated twice, impatiently, before Hatfield heard Doc McGraw's shuffling feet. The door clicked open. Doc McGraw sounded convincingly sleepy.

"Oh, hello, Sheriff. What's matter? Another bellyache?"

"Not tonight." Sheriff Ed Daley's voice rang crisply with authority, altogether different from the lazy drawl Hatfield had heard that afternoon. "We're lookin' for a man. You treated any gunshot patients tonight?"

Doc McGraw yawned loudly. "Who you looking for?"

"Curly Baxter. Fellow tends bar over to the Red Rooster. You seen 'im?"

"Can't say so. What'd he do?"

"We just got evidence he's one of the gang's been cuttin' fences and tearin' down windmills. You sure you ain't seen 'im?"

"Yeah," Doc said. "What kind of evidence you got, Sheriff?"

Sheriff Ed Daley's voice thinned with impatience. "Mind if we look around?"

There was a pause. Doc McGraw didn't sound sleepy any more. "Got a search warrant?"

Sheriff Daley cursed. "Get out of the way, Doc. We're taking a look."

There was a little scuffle, and the Doc's sharp snort of outrage. But Doc didn't protest too much. Hatfield thought fleetingly that the old medico was a good actor, then boots thumped down the hall. The floor boards vibrated under his head.

Noiselessly Hatfield drew his right-hand gun.

Light brightened the bedroom floor. Three pairs of feet clumped into the room. Two were moccasin-clad. The third wore black, high-heeled boots with silver spurs. Hatfield recognized the spurs. Then Doc McGraw's bare toes entered the door, and the Doc's voice said, "That's my daughter's boodwar."

Helen turned over in the bed. She said, "What's—" and then she gave a little shriek.

The boots began to back toward the doorway.

"Beg pardon, ma'am." Hatfield could imagine the fat sheriff flushing. "We was—well—ma'am, I'm real sorry. We didn't aim—"

The spurred boots turned and went hastily the other way, followed by the moccasins.

Hatfield eased his thumb off his gun-hammer.

Ten minutes later, he slipped out Doc McGraw's back door and skulked up the pitch-black alley. His hat was pulled low over his eyes; he was scowling viciously. At the corner he halted beside a cottonwood tree.

HATFIELD seldom got in a bad mood with himself. But he was now. With the pressure of events momentarily slackened, he had time to think, to evaluate his actions. He reflected with bleak self-doubt that he'd accomplished nothing since his arrival in the Panhandle except to stir up a hornet's nest of violence. He had been singularly inefficient.

Grim-faced, he stood and rubbed his jaw. Down the street three blocks he saw a bobbing lantern, its moving circle like a hole in darkness. The hole revealed Sheriff Ed Daley and his two buffalo hunter companions crossing resolutely toward the Red Rooster Saloon. Hatfield saw them step up on the boardwalk, heard the slam of a pistol butt against the saloon door. Soundlessly he moved on, immersed in his own bitter thoughts.

Nobody could have tried harder, he told himself. Yet nothing was changed. Colonel Ames still grasped childishly for a kingdom. The buffalo hunters still roamed at large, brutal men, with Lyle Foreman and

Sheriff Daley to lead them. Curly Baxter lay in Doc's house there with a painful bullet-hole in him. And where would it end? What was his next step?

Hatfield didn't know.

His mood grew worse when he finally reached the spot where he had left the buggy. Goldy moved up like a great soundless cat out of the blackness and thrust his nose against Hatfield's chest. Hatfield massaged Goldy's neck a moment, then turned to the mare.

She had collapsed between the shafts from exhaustion. Her nostrils were cold.

Hatfield knelt over her and felt for a heartbeat.

There wasn't any.

He left the buggy and the dead mare in the alley. Sheriff Daley would find them, he knew. First he fumbled at the tail of the buggy and found Goldy's bridle. Then, with the loose end of the reins around Goldy's neck, he stalked toward the hotel, carrying his warbag. His face, in the darkness, was like stone.

The hotel clerk was a pimple-faced youth, asleep on crossed arms beneath the subdued glow of a green-shaded lamp. He snored gently. Hatfield slapped the smooth surface of the desk with the flat of his hand.

The youth jerked awake, rubbed his eyes. "Yessir."

"A room," Hatfield said. "And a rub-down and grain for my horse."

"Yessir." The clerk yawned, rubbed his neck, fumbled for a pencil. "I'll write the order to the livery clerk. He'll take care of your horse, first thing in the morning."

"I want it done now."

The clerk looked up quickly. His eyes darted to the star and circle badge, then to Hatfield's stony face. The youth stared at Hatfield's face as if fascinated. His jaw slacked. He broke his gaze with something like a shudder.

"Yessir. I—I'll take care of it myself."

Hatfield did not speak. He waited stiff-

[*Turn page*]

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ly, without moving, till the clerk shoved the register toward him. Turning the register, the clerk handed him a letter.

"You're Ranger Jim Hatfield, ain't you, sir? Colonel Ames' Wong left this for you. Said you'd likely be in.".

Hatfield signed his name and slit the envelope with his thumbnail. It was a note from the Colonel. It read:

Jim; Martha returned home after you left, accompanied by George Tree. These two foolish children claim my permission to get married. Martha informs me this idiotic scheme meets with your approval. If this is so, I consider it a grave infringement on my rights as a parent. I expect you to ride out to my place immediately and inform Martha that you acted ill advisedly, that you do not approve of her marriage to this Tree. Since you have interfered in this manner with my affairs, I expect you to do everything possible to rectify matters. I shall wait up all night for you, if necessary.

Hatfield crumpled the letter in his fist. He didn't know he was staring at the room clerk till he saw the youth slowly whiten. The clerk was holding a key toward him.

"Room Twenty-two, sir."

Hatfield said, "Don't forget my horse."

He took the key and stalked upstairs, warbag under his arm. In Room Twenty-two, he locked the door behind him and threw himself, fully dressed, across the bed.

CHAPTER XII

Thieves Fall Out

BRIGHT sunlight pierced the curtain of sleep. Hatfield rolled to his feet and stretched stiffly, at first feeling only bodily, concrete things. The sun had topped the courthouse roof. It jammed a whole skyful of yellow light into the shabby hotel room. He stumbled across the floor and splashed lukewarm water into his face.

As he rubbed his jaws with the towel, the old doubts hit him again.

He peeled off his rumpled clothes and drenched his body with water from the pitcher. He shaved and rummaged for fresh garments in his warbag. Fifteen minutes later he descended the stairs.

The pimple-faced clerk still sat at the desk, looking red-eyed and tired. Hatfield saw the youth's apprehensive start. He forced a smile.

"Morning, sonny."

The youth's scared face shifted into an uncertain grin. "Morning, sir. I stabled and fed your horse, last night."

"Good enough." Hatfield laid a half dollar on the desk. "Sorry I bit your head off."

The youth flushed. "That's all right. I reckon you got your worries."

Hatfield nodded. "But worries don't mean a man can't act human. You have my apology."

The youth gulped. He leaned across the desk, fist clenched. "Mr. Hatfield, lots of people talk worse'n you did last night. But you're the first man ever came around and said he was sorry."

"Thanks," Hatfield said gravely. "You start the day off right. Could I have my horse in fifteen minutes?"

"It'd be a pleasure."

Hatfield turned and entered the dining room. He was smiling. Suddenly, somehow, things didn't look so black.

Three or four merchants and drummers were seated at bacon and eggs and coffee on the red-checkered tablecloths. Hatfield gave his own order to a pretty waitress, cheerfully now. He was hungrily eating the eggs when a shadow fell across him. He looked up into the eyes of Sheriff Ed Daley.

Daley's eyes were bloodshot. He hadn't shaved; his beard-stubble looked blue against pasty skin. His fat mouth had an odd shape, and there was a dirty scab on his nose.

Beside Daley stood the big buffalo hunter, leaning on his rifle. Two red streaks lay high on his cheek-bones, where Hatfield's boot heels had marked him yesterday.

Hatfield said, "Morning, boys. Sit down. The eggs are good here, and the waitress ain't bad."

Sheriff Daley's odd-shaped mouth didn't

move. He kicked out a chair and sat down beside Hatfield. The buffalo hunter dropped into the chair on Hatfield's other side. Once again Hatfield's nostrils twitched at the big man's rank scent.

Sheriff Daley said, "Where's the kid?"

Hatfield grinned and popped a piece of crisp bacon into his mouth. "Which kid, Sheriff?"

"You know which. Baxter. He ain't at Doc McGraw's, nor the Red Rooster, nor here in the hotel. Where is he?"

Slowly Hatfield chewed his bacon and swallowed it. He took a sip of coffee.

"Sheriff," he said gravely, "I turned him into a chipmunk with my magic wand."

Sheriff Daley's face turned speckled red. The big buffalo hunter leaned an elbow on the table. The table groaned.

"Hatfield," the hunter said, "you want to watch it."

Hatfield said "I hate to be impolite, friend. But how long since you had a bath?"

The buffalo hunter grunted, "Why, you—" and pushed to his feet, lips writhing.

Sheriff Daley's voice cut him off "Not now, Fred."

THE HUNTER stood there, glaring. His fingers twitched at his rifle-barrel. At length he jerked his gaze from Hatfield and stalked angrily off into the lobby.

Sheriff Daley heaved a deep, fat sigh.

"You see how it is, Hatfield?"

Hatfield shook his head. "How is it?"

"I can't hardly hold the boys in. They got proof Baxter's been doing this night raiding. If you want that kid to keep on living, you better help me find him before they do."

Hatfield appraised the dirty scab on Daley's nose with interest. "Sheriff," he said, "you didn't fall off your horse, did you? Out in a prairie dog town, say?"

Sheriff Ed Daley stood up.

"You got till sundown," he said.

Hatfield nodded. "Thank you kindly, Sheriff."

After the Sheriff left, he quietly finished his eggs.

He rode out of town without hindrance. Goldy struck a steady jog-trot down the sandy road, apparently none the worse for last night's run. Sagebrush nodded peacefully along fence rows. This third day was like the others, hot and windy. Hatfield felt dust sift against his face.

He believed that Curly Baxter was safe now. Having searched Doc McGraw's place once, Daley and his buffalo hunters would not likely bother it again, at least for a few hours.

As he rode, Hatfield found himself wondering about Lyle Foreman. Events were moving to some sort of climax, he knew; Foreman's absence gnawed at him. Possibly the man was at home, nursing his broken arm. But Hatfield doubted that.

He passed through the Colonel's gate and searched the terrain curiously, wondering if he could find evidence of last night's wild ride. At the prairie dog town he saw a dark brown mound, which proved to be a dead horse. Hatfield approached.

Saddle and bridle had been stripped from it. The animal lay grotesquely. Reading sign, Hatfield saw it had thrust its foreleg into a dog hole. Its neck had been broken in the headlong fall. He turned away, a little sick.

A half-mile further on, he reached the spot where he had wounded one of the ambushers. Trampled sagebrush spread over a wide area, here. And in the middle, surrounded by boot heel tracks, a large dried puddle of darkening blood stained the crumpled sage brown.

Hatfield swallowed hard against that old lump of lead in his belly, that old intuitive heaviness that said as plain as any evidence that last night he had killed a man.

He yanked his hat down and rode on. His shoulders swayed stiffly.

Colonel Ames' big white house loomed into view, sparkling in the morning sunlight. As he approached, Hatfield frowned, sensing some vague disturbance. A dozen punchers clustered before the bunkhouse. Hands flashed. Faces were contorted in

argument. A group of saddle horses dragged reins in the dirt nearby.

The front door of the big house hung open. The building looked blankly vacant.

Hatfield hunched forward and tickled Goldy with the spurs.

As he galloped into the yard, the punchers broke off their argument and streamed toward him. From the big house, George Tree burst forth and loped toward the picket gate. Behind ran Martha Ames, golden hair streaming. Tear tracks streaked her face.

"What's the matter?" Hatfield swung from saddle as George Tree dug boot heels into sand and skidded to a halt. George's face was pale. Little yellow whiskers sprinkled his jaws like sand.

"The Colonel's been kidnaped!" George croaked.

IT WAS the blackest moment in Hatfield's life. He blamed himself.

He sat on the railing of the big, honeysuckle-shaded front porch. Before him Martha sat in a big chair, twisting her knuckles. George Tree sat beside Martha, nervously smoking one cigarette after another. George couldn't keep his fingers still. He twisted at his cigarettes; he drummed ceaselessly on his chair arm; he reached across now and then to touch Martha's arm.

The punchers squatted against the wall, haunches on spurred boots, belted guns dragging the porch floor.

They all looked at Hatfield.

Hatfield said, "It's my fault. I should've come, when I got his letter."

Martha Ames shook her head. The tear tracks on her cheeks were dry. Evidently she'd been thinking hard.

"You'd have been too late, I imagine, Jim. It happened a little before midnight."

Hatfield said, "Tell me."

Martha nodded. "We were sitting in the library. Arguing. You know — about whether George and I would get married." She smiled fleetingly at George. George reddened a little.

Martha went on gravely, "Dad heard a noise, out in the corrals. He thought it was you, Jim, coming in answer to his letter. He went out to help you unsaddle Goldy." She bit her lip. Tears glistened at the corners of her blue eyes. "He— never came back."

Martha dipped her head and began to cry silently, fingers cupped to her face. George Tree shoved erect and laid a hand on her shaking shoulder. A muscle jerked convulsively in his jaw.

Jim Hatfield pulled off a honeysuckle leaf and shredded it to bits.

Despite Martha's words, he knew that he had bungled badly. He should have guessed this might happen. He should have taken precautions.

He sat there, shredding the honeysuckle leaf, feeling the prod of eyes. The knowledge that they all looked to him for leadership dragged like a stone around his shoulders.

For Hatfield didn't know what to do.

He pinched off another honeysuckle leaf. Panic pulled at him. He wanted to ride away. Clear out of the Panhandle. Clear out of Texas. Start a new life some place, where perhaps he could forget his failure. For Hatfield didn't see how he could ever face Cap'n Bill McDowell again, after this.

But then, for no particular reason, Hatfield shook his head. He looked at Martha.

"Girl," he said, "I promise this. If anything happens to your pa, I'll kill the man with my own two hands!"

Things seemed a little better, after that. Martha dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. George slumped back in his chair and rolled another cigarette. One of the punchers stood up.

"Where we start to look, Ranger?"

Hatfield said, "We'll have to think."

He crossed his slim legs and hunched on the railing, chin in palm. He forced a kind of cold, savage logic. Off in the sagebrush, a quail twitted its bob-white call.

He said, "Where do the buffalo hunters live?"

George Tree breathed smoke out his nose. "At the hotel. But they don't hang

around there much. Mostly they spend their time in the Red Rooster, or at the courthouse or over at Lyle Foreman's place."

Hatfield said, "The sheriff?"

"He lives at the hotel, too."

Hatfield nodded. He was seeing clearly now. Things were beginning to make sense to the Ranger.

"Boys, you know what's happened, don't you?" He caught a puncher's grim nod and went on. "The thieves have fallen out. It must be that. Nobody else'd kidnap the Colonel. I've seen it happen a hundred times."

GEORGE TREE fingered his cigarette. Those bleak white lines marked his face.

"That means," Hatfield went on, "That either Sheriff Daley, or the buffalo hunters, or Lyle Foreman have got him." He paused, then forced himself to add for Martha's sake, "If he's still alive. Martha, you'd best be ready for the worst."

Martha twisted her knuckles. From her eyes, Hatfield knew that she could face whatever came.

"All right," he said crisply. "They wouldn't keep him at the hotel. Nor the courthouse. That'd be too dangerous. So he must be at Foreman's."

The puncher who was standing said, "That's enough for me," and pulled his gun and began to twirl the cylinder. The spinning cylinder made an oily, clicking noise.

Hatfield shook his head.

"You boys'll stay here. That's an order. I'll not have a bunch of armed men gallopin' around the country, shooting everything in sight." He turned to George. "You take Martha to town. Wait at Doc McGraw's. If I find the Colonel, I'll bring him there. He'll likely need the Doc—"

He broke off, clamped his jaw firmly shut. He stepped down off the railing and moved toward the steps. On the dusty grass he paused to call back over his shoulder:

"And George—stay off the streets."

CHAPTER XIII

Trapped

QUICKLY mounted, Hatfield stretched Goldy into a hard run. The wind bellied his shirt. He yanked his hat down squarely on his forehead. Sagebrush whipped beneath his boots.

Riding at a dead run was the the easiest possible gait for a rider, but killing to a horse. Dismounting to open the Colonel's line gate, Hatfield noted sweat-froth oozing from under Goldy's saddle blanket.

But he forced the run another half mile, until the big yellow gelding's breath strained in labored grunts. Then he hauled back to a gallop, reluctantly curbing his impatience. After a mile at the gallop, he let Goldy run again.

Goldy was still running, a great golden bundle of flashing legs and milky, trailing froth, when Lyle Foreman's ramshackle frame house lifted into view. Hatfield reined up at Foreman's tangled gate. Between his legs, Goldy's big barrel heaved and caved. Hatfield rubbed the horse's wet neck while he studied the layout with narrowed eyes.

The sagging house with its precariously tipped chimney looked empty. Lyle Foreman's white horse grazed unconcernedly in the front yard. Dust powdered the horse's back where it had rolled. Nobody moved about the barn in back. The pump handle stood lonesomely at half mast. The house windows stared like blank eyes.

Hatfield stepped down and threw open the gate, thinking hard. He had no desire to walk into an ambush. Yet in this flat terrain, a hidden approach to the house was impossible. He closed the gate and stood holding Goldy's reins, nibbling his lip. The urgency of his mission here struggled with caution. At length he shrugged and lifted a hand to Goldy's soft nose.

"Got to take chances once in a while, eh, boy?"

Tired as he was, Goldy thrust his nose

up against Hatfield's chest. Hatfield grinned. He mounted and rode steadily, at a slow walk, into the yard.

There he dismounted again. Goldy whickered at the white horse. The white horse lifted his head, then went placidly back to grazing. From the house, there was no sound.

Hatfield walked up on the porch.

The porch floor creaked underfoot. He knocked on the sagging screen door.

Nothing moved. He heard the tearing sound of the white horse grazing.

Hatfield drew his right-hand gun and tried the door with his left. It opened easily. He stepped inside.

In the dimness, a body lay in the far corner. He thought at first the Colonel was dead, but then his eyes adjusted. The Colonel lay bound hand and foot, with a dirty bandanna strapped across his mouth. But the Colonel's eyes were open, staring at him, signaling frantically.

"Drop the gun," Lyle Foreman said behind him.

Hatfield didn't move. He stood quietly a moment, his mouth thinning as he estimated the timbre of Foreman's voice. Then he said,

"It's a good gun, Lyle. I hate to bang it up."

Foreman's boots whispered on wood. "You won't be needing it again. Go ahead. Drop it."

With a shrug, Hatfield dropped the gun. He turned, and there stood Foreman staring him in the face, left arm in his white sling, right hand gripping the big butt of a .45. Foreman's fingers were white around the gun-butt.

Hatfield grinned. "You wouldn't kill me, Lyle."

"Wouldn't I? After what you did?" Foreman had a haggard, beaten look. Hatfield knew the pain of his broken arm had robbed the man of sleep last night. Foreman's peeling sunburn made dead, white patches in his whiskers.

HATFIELD shook his head. He spoke with certainty.

"You'd like to, sure. But I'm the only man knows where Curly Baxter is. You can't afford to have me dead."

Foreman prodded the .45 forward an inch. "I could shoot you in the leg. Try something, Hatfield, and I will."

Hatfield said, "That'd be too bad, Lyle. Because—"

He swung a booted foot, fast.

He didn't aim for Foreman's gun. He kicked at the man's injured arm.

It was brutal, but it worked. Foreman's eyes bugged, and he jerked the gun around as Hatfield's boot cracked the splint under the white padded sling. Foreman screeched in agony and pulled trigger. Concussion knocked Hatfield backward. The bullet fanned his cheek.

He was off-balance a little. But through coiling powder smoke he saw Foreman sink to his knees, tears of pain sprouting. Foreman still gripped the .45 in his right fist. He fought to raise it. His finger squeezed trigger. Hatfield saw the gun's hammer nudge up, and he knew that in another minute Foreman would shoot him dead.

He jumped against the man. He lit atop Foreman with knees bent. Foreman's face bounced off his thigh. Hatfield grappled for the gun and closed fingers on the round, hard barrel and twisted, just as Foreman fired.

The gun-barrel burned Hatfield's fingers. Beneath his knees, Foreman's body stiffened, thrusting him upward. Then Foreman suddenly relaxed. He slumped face downward to the floor.

Hatfield got to his feet.

He stood, holding Foreman's gun by its hot barrel. He stared at Foreman with the gun's heat sinking slowly into his consciousness. At length he dropped the gun and went over and threw Foreman's head back.

That second shot had entered the soft under side of Foreman's chin. It had continued straight upward, to emerge in the top of Foreman's head. There was a hole there, the size of a half-dollar.

Hatfield cut the Colonel's ropes. He untied the dirty bandanna from the Colonel's mouth and chucked it in a corner.

He hauled the Colonel to his feet.

The Colonel stood a moment, rubbing stiff legs with gnarled old fingers. Then he hobbled over to stare down at Lyle Foreman's body. The Colonel's face broke into deep grooves.

At length, wordlessly, he turned and stumped to the front door. Outside, the old man sank to a seat on the low edge of the porch. He rubbed his hands over his grooved face. He fumbled in his shirt pocket and fished up the two halves of a broken cigar. He slipped one of the halves into his mouth.

"Got a match, Jim?"

Hatfield wiped a match alight and touched the Colonel's half-cigar. The broken edges flared up and didn't burn right. The Colonel puffed deeply for a while, then rolled the cigar in his fingers, staring at it, saying nothing.

Hatfield broke the silence. "It could have been worse, Colonel."

The Colonel lifted his sturdy shoulders and let them fall. "I'm alive. That what you mean?"

Hatfield nodded. "Long as you're alive, it's not too late to change." He stood before the Colonel, with his boot on the low porch floor. "You can pay for the damage you've caused."

"Some of it," the Colonel said wearily. "Some of it, Jim."

Hatfield said, "I'll get the horses."

GIVING the Colonel his chance to sort it out, he strode out across the yard. He caught Goldy's reins and hitched him to the porch. He walked out to the barn and found the Colonel's blue mare there. After saddling the mare, he returned to the porch. The Colonel had smoked the first part of the half-broken cigar and was lighting the second off the stub. The deep lines in the old man's face made him look ninety years old, Hatfield thought.

"Jim," the Colonel said, "I was a fool."

Hatfield allowed himself a fleeting smile. "I told you that."

"Yes. I was trying to set up a kingdom —like you said. A benevolent dictatorship."

Hatfield didn't speak. He stood there, holding the reins of the two horses.

"Jim," the Colonel said, "I was going to be good to them."

Gravely, Hatfield nodded. "I know you were, Colonel. You just wanted to be the boss."

The Colonel chewed his mustache. This bitter moment would pass, Hatfield thought. But while it lasted, it would do the Colonel good. The Colonel sat there with his hands on his knees and his sturdy belly hanging over his lap, chewing his mustache.

"I wrote that threatening letter," the Colonel said. "I threw the knife at you, that night. I never meant to hit you, Jim. I just wanted to scare you off."

Hatfield said gently, "I know."

"It all went wrong," the Colonel said. "I never dreamed it could go so wrong."

Hatfield helped it along a little. "When did it start going wrong, Colonel?"

"That night you brought Baxter out. I'd given Foreman three hundred dollars to pay Baxter, for faking the election count. When Baxter said he hadn't got it, I knew Foreman and the others were doublecrossing me." The Colonel scrubbed a veined hand across his eyes. "Then when they tried to kill Baxter, I knew it was over."

A PLOW—AND HOW!

OBVIOUSLY, the largest plow in the world is the one in everyday use on a certain farm in Texas. It is 60-feet wide, weighs 10 tons, and nonchalantly cuts all of 88 furrows. It can usually till 17 acres in an hour, and it is drawn by an 85-horsepower tractor.

—*William Carter*

The Colonel sighed. "I tried to stop it, then. But you can't stop that kind of thing, Jim. I'd thought I was clever, hiring a smart man like Foreman. But Foreman was too smart. The buffalo hunters were too salty—saltier than I'd wanted. And Ed Daley was too greedy. He wasn't content with what I paid him. He wanted more. He wanted the county for himself."

Hatfield said, "It's the old story."

"I suppose. A dictatorship like I planned can never be benevolent, because of men like Foreman and Daley. They stooped to tools I wouldn't use. It's a sad lesson, Jim."

Hatfield nodded. "But you've learned it, Colonel."

"Yes. Now Daley and the hunters will try to take over. I taught Daley how to fake elections. He'll keep on faking them. He'll run off the homesteaders, the way I'd planned, and take the land for himself. In ten years he'll be a rich man, Jim. And this county'll have a bloody history to live down." The Colonel's shoulders trembled a little. "Foreman was the brains. He had sense enough not to kill. But Daley now—Jim, it'll be a mess."

"I reckon." Hatfield had been thinking along the same lines. He knew that Foreman's death had shadowed the county with peril. For Foreman had doubtless been a restraining influence. Unchecked now, Ed Daley and the buffalo hunters would stop at nothing.

The Colonel said dully, "Foreman was going to kill me. He kept me alive to use as bait, to draw you in. They were going to kill you and me and Curly Baxter."

Hatfield nodded. "Daley'll try that now. He'll have to, because we three know too much. Daley can't afford an investigation. That's why he was hunting Baxter last night, I guess." He caught up the reins. "Colonel, your life and mine and Curly's isn't worth a Confederate nickel, long as we're in the county. We'll have to vamoose, till I can get help from Austin. Come on. We've got to get Baxter out of town, before Daley's gunslingers find him."

Slowly the Colonel got up, hobbled to his blue mare, and heaved grunting to saddle. Curiously Hatfield asked,

"One more question, Colonel. Were you aiming to use political influence to stop my investigation?"

"Hell, boy," the Colonel said wearily, "I got no influence. I ain't been down to Austin in years."

CHAPTER XIV

Safe Harbor

REDBANK TOWN sweltered under a dazzling noon sun. Jim Hatfield stalked softly afoot up back alleys beside Colonel Ames. To attract less attention, they had staked the horses at the edge of town.

The wind had died. This was one of those rare calms that touched the Panhandle now and then. It let sweat trickle undrying down his cheeks. The heat seemed suddenly unbearable.

He said, "Keep an eye peeled, Colonel. If they see us—"

The Colonel nodded and stumped along silently. The alleys were deep in sand, making walking difficult. The old man's back was dark with sweat.

The Colonel grunted, "I could've stayed with the critters, Jim. Saved hoofing it in this heat."

Hatfield said, "The buffalo hunters could've found you, too. We've got to stick together."

They passed ash cans and back yard chicken coops. The stench from outhouses twitched Hatfield's nostrils. A big blue fly buzzed past his face. He gripped the Colonel's arm at the next street and half-ran the old man across, hand near his gunbutt. But the street lay empty.

Looking down toward Main, Hatfield saw the courthouse, with the little windmill before it standing dead and lifeless now. He saw a face in a courthouse window. It was a fat face. As Hatfield watched it, he saw the jaw drop, saw the

head turn in a quick shout to somebody in the room. An arm gestured urgently. Beside Hatfield, the Colonel breathed noisily through his nose.

Hatfield said quietly, "Daley just saw us, Colonel. We'll have to run."

Blood left Colonel Ames' cheeks for just an instant. He nodded and croaked, "Damn this heat!" and broke into a lumbering gallop.

They were three blocks from Doc McGraw's house.. One more straight ahead, then two down toward Main.

Hatfield pushed into a lope behind the Colonel, his long legs covering the ground easily. He had drawn his guns instinctively. They dangled loosely from bent wrists. He knew Sheriff Daley would be sending the buffalo hunters to cut them off. A break for Daley, he thought. If Daley guessed where they were heading.

He said suddenly, "Cut through here, Colonel. No sense staying in sight making targets of ourselves."

Obediently the Colonel lumbered off to the left, legs pumping. Hatfield grinned as the old man plowed squarely through a back yard garden of late corn and tomato plants without stopping. Unhesitatingly the Colonel plunged through the narrow space between two houses. Following, Hatfield saw a wide-eyed woman at a window, clutching a pink wrapper about her throat and calling complainingly after the Colonel about the damaged garden.

Then the Colonel broke into the street with Hatfield scarcely five paces behind. A gunshot bucketed through the still afternoon.

Hatfield saw the Colonel fall heavily in in the sand, roll to his feet, and hobble onward with dirt clinging to his sweaty back. He saw one of the buffalo hunters a half-block upstreet, spraddle-legged beside a cottonwood tree, rifle at shoulder, the muzzle of the rifle moving as the hunter followed the Colonel with it, taking second aim.

Hatfield shot. The hunter pulled the rifle back sharply, hitting his face with it. He looked accusingly at the rifle, then abruptly pitched forward on his chin with a tiny stream of blood ribboning between his eyes. Hatfield ran on.

UP AHEAD, Colonel Ames vaulted a picket fence. Hatfield sprinted forward and cleared the fence and loped past the old man. He shouted, "Keep coming, Colonel!" and passed a group of three startled boys playing marbles in the shade.

In the next alley, Hatfield caught a momentary glimpse of the courthouse through the sharp angles of two houses. He saw Sheriff Ed Daley running past the windmill with two of the buffalo hunters. They turned upstreet toward Doc McGraw's.

Another picket fence lay ahead, and another street to cross. Hatfield paused long enough to kick the fence gate open, so the Colonel wouldn't have to jump it. Two doors down, he saw a young mother scoop a baby into her arms and dash into the house, alarmed by the shooting. Otherwise the street was empty.

Hatfield's wind began to go now. Red mist ebbed and flowed from the earth. He kept going, through another yard and between two scraggy peach trees and into another alley. Behind, he heard the hoarse gasping of the Colonel. And then he saw Doc McGraw's back door.

Curly Baxter was crouched on the back step, beckoning urgently with a six-gun.

Hatfield croaked through dry lips, "Little more, Colonel," and saw Sheriff Daley and one buffalo hunter gallop into Doc McGraw's front yard.

Fire spat from a side window. Sheriff Daley's hat kicked off his head and spun on the grass. Daley and the hunter ducked back frantically to the walk and began to dart around the house next door.

As he ran now, Hatfield watched the rear of that next door house. He heard the Colonel's hobbling footsteps falter, and immediately slowed to a walk to let the old man pass. The Colonel wheezed like a wind-broke horse. "Come on," the Colonel said chokingly. "I can make it."

And so Hatfield ran on, with the Colonel at his side. He galloped into Doc McGraw's back yard, then up to the wooden

steps. The Colonel's boots pounded the steps as Sheriff Daley dashed from cover next door, slamming shots at them.

Splinters bit Hatfield's face. Ricocheting lead screamed. He anchored his foot on the first step and fired. He climbed two more steps and fired again. Curly Baxter hunched beside him now, with a jumping, thundering gun in his thin fist. And out there on the grass, Sheriff Daley wheeled in panic and ran to hide.

"Inside!" Hatfield said, and rammed Curly Baxter through the door.

In the kitchen, Curly leaned against the cast iron sink and dropped his gun. Curly's hands trembled uncontrollably. His curly hair shone jet black against his pale face. Curly braced himself against the sink and grinned through shaking lips.

"I'm scared! Holy Gee, I'm scared, Jim!"

Hatfield hit Curly on the shoulder, smiling. "You damned fool, who isn't?"

And then he turned to the Colonel.

The Colonel had collapsed to the floor, with his back against the black wood cook stove. His face was purple. His chest heaved. Sweat dripped from his mustache. But a faint upquirk touched the Colonel's mouth, and as Doc McGraw and Martha burst into the room, the Colonel managed to speak.

"The dirty son shot off my boot heel, Jim. That's why I couldn't run so good."

HATFIELD took charge of the defense. He worked quickly, for he didn't know how much time he had. He stationed George Tree in the kitchen. He put Curly Baxter at the bedroom windows. He left Doc McGraw in his office, where he could cover both the front and far side of the house.

Doc McGraw carried his calomel bottle stuffed into the pocket of his white coat. A black powder smear marked his cheek. It was he who had shot off Ed Daley's hat. He stood at the window and fondled a .44 saddle carbine lovingly.

Hatfield said, "Don't be too eager, Doc. You danged near made buzzard meat out of Daley. No sense giving your business to the undertaker."

Doc McGraw snorted. "Hell, Jim, didn't you know? I'm the undertaker, too."

Grinning, Hatfield moved through the house. He'd had a drink of water and recovered his wind. Strangely he felt surprisingly cheerful.

He found Helen McGraw and Martha working over the Colonel in the kitchen. They had stripped off his wet shirt and were swabbing his hot, red body with cooling cloths. The Colonel held a glass of water in his fist, to which Hatfield had seen Helen add a spoonful of salt. The Colonel ran a hand through his wet, gray hair and smiled.

"Be with you in a minute, Jim. Soon as these sirens get done pampering."

"Take your time, Colonel," Hatfield said. "I reckon Ed Daley'll have to figure a while. To think what to try next."

He looked at George Tree, who was peering around a curtain with a Colts in his big hand. George grinned. Hatfield grinned back and walked into the bedroom.

Curly Baxter looked around from the bedroom window and beckoned him over. When Hatfield approached, Curly's gaunt face lit up and he whispered hoarsely:

"I asked her, Jim. This morning, after breakfast."

Hatfield said unbelievingly, "No? You didn't! What'd she say, Curly?"

"Told me she'd think it over. But she listened, Jim. She listened real hard. I—think I got a chance."

Hatfield said, "Stay right in there, Curly. If they don't say no, that means yes. Take an old bachelor's word."

He was moving out of the bedroom when he heard Doc McGraw call:

"Here comes Daley! With a white rag on a rifle barrel. Flag of truce, Jim."

Hatfield said, "Coming, Doc!" and sprinted into Doc's office.

Standing by a glass case filled with medicine and apparatus, tools of Doc's trade, Hatfield could look through the screened window and down past the honeysuckle-shaded porch to the boardwalk.

Sheriff Ed Daley stalked forward hold-

ing an upright rifle. A torn white undershirt fluttered from the rifle's front sight.

Behind Daley strode four of the bearded, buckskin-clad buffalo hunters.

Hatfield trained both guns through the window screen.

He asked quietly, "Doc, how many of them buffalo hunters were there?"

"Six." The butt of Doc McGraw's carbine clinked against the calomel bottle in his pocket. "I only see four now."

Hatfield grinned thinly. "I killed two, I reckon. One last night, one just now in the street. Doc, when they all come up on the porch, you slip back and get George and Curly in here."

Doc McGraw grunted. Then boots clumped outside the window.

The five men pushed into the small, shaded porch, crowding the honeysuckle. Hatfield heard Doc McGraw slip away. He kept watching Sheriff Ed Daley.

The heat bothered Daley. Hatless now, the fat sheriff was sweating profusely. The rolls of fat on his face, shining with sweat, had a greasy look.

"Hello the house!" Daley called.

"Stay put, Daley," Hatfield said calmly. "What you want?"

Daley said, "Don't shoot, Hatfield. I'm settin' down the rifle."

"All right. But watch your hands."

CHAPTER XV

No More Bosses

DALEY leaned the rifle against the window screen. "I'm reachin' for a handkerchief," he said.

Moving carefully, he pulled a handkerchief from his hip pocket and swabbed his wet face, sighing.

"Hatfield," he said complainingly, "why raise so damned much hell?"

Jim Hatfield felt his lips draw back against his teeth. Behind him, footfalls rustled. Doc had returned with Curly and George.

"I don't like to be shot at, Daley."

Daley shook his head, chins trembling. "You can leave the county. You and Baxter and the Colonel. If you leave peaceable."

Hatfield said drily, "That's why you shot at us? So we'd leave peaceable."

"It's your last chance," Daley said.

"I trust you," Hatfield said, "like I trust a rattlesnake."

Sheriff Daley grinned and shrugged. "It was worth a try. I didn't think you'd fall for it."

Hatfield heard a gurgling sound behind him—Doc McGraw drinking dandelion wine. He said, "Well, Daley?"

"You can let the women out. And Doc McGraw. Before we burn the house."

Thin-lipped, Hatfield shook his head. "You wouldn't dare. The whole town'd be down on you."

Daley said, "You think I'd let you live? To talk to a jury?"

Hatfield said, "Does it mean that much to you, Daley? You'd really burn us out—kill us—just to control the county? Are you so damned power hungry?"

Daley said, "I'm picking up my rifle."

The fat sheriff reached for his rifle. Hatfield saw the white undershirt flutter against the screen, and with a sudden flash of instinct he stepped sideward just as the gun exploded at point-blank range.

The tongue of flame licked through the screen. Glass tinkled behind Hatfield. He shouted, "Here they come!" and fired at Daley's rifle as it rammed forward, ripping the screen. Metal rang against metal. Outside, there was a screech of tearing wood. The buffalo hunters had leaped through the honeysuckle, tearing the trellis down.

Hatfield bellowed, "Watch the back!" and wheeled for the kitchen at a lunging run. Five of them, he thought. Enough to attack the house from all sides. Firing commenced in Doc's office.

A black form slashed at the bedroom window screen with a knife as Hatfield sprinted through the hall. He skidded to a halt and hung there in the doorway long enough to snap a shot across the room.

The black form clutched a shoulder and fell away. Hatfield didn't stop to see if the man was dead, because Martha Ames' scream lifted from the kitchen.

He hit the kitchen doorway running full speed. He collided hard with a black beard and felt himself fall backward, with the stench of one of the unwashed gun slingers in his nostrils. He bounced off the cook stove and saw the hunter aiming a rifle at him, saw a second hunter loom through the open back door.

Hatfield fired both guns into the first man. The two guns exploded with a blast that knocked a saucepan down from a shelf over the stove. The saucepan clattered tinnily against the stove, and Hatfield saw the second hunter aiming his long rifle at the Colonel, who was trying desperately to shield both girls behind his sturdy body.

HATFIELD bawled, *"Hey, friend!"* and pulled trigger, just as the buffalo hunter turned and fired his rifle.

The saucepan on the cookstove kicked crazily. The hunter dropped his rifle and walked into the center of the kitchen, where he stopped, leaned quietly sideward, and kept on leaning till he bounced on his shoulder against the floor.

Hatfield heard more firing from Doc McGraw's office, heard George Tree's bellow for help. He said, "Watch it, Colonel!" and dashed back down the hall.

In Doc's office, Sheriff Ed Daley and the remaining buffalo hunter had somehow rammed unharmed through the front door. Hatfield saw Curly Baxter stretched dead or unconscious on the floor, saw George Tree slumping forward with blood spurting from his shoulder.

The buffalo hunter was on his knees, firing at Doc McGraw. Oddly, Doc sat on the kitchen table in his office, short legs dangling, his bald head ashine with sweat, jerking the lever of his carbine and pumping blast after blast at the buffalo hunter.

Sheriff Daley whirled at Hatfield's approach. Daley carried his rifle with the white undershirt cradled in his elbow.

For one strange moment, Hatfield stared at Daley across a space of perhaps three feet. Daley's eyes glittered evilly.

Hatfield said, "Throw it down, Daley."

Daley stuck his tongue in his cheek and lifted the rifle with the white undershirt and tried to use the barrel as a club. Hatfield threw up his left arm, felt the barrel crack against bone, and fired with his right gun. Ed Daley clasped his hands to his belly and said, "Umph!" and his eyes rolled up, showing white as he fell.

A fat man, Hatfield thought giddily. But he had guts.

He wheeled and saw Doc McGraw jump down off the kitchen table and toss his carbine to the floor. In front of Doc, the last buffalo hunter lay stretched face-down with blood oozing out his ear.

The sudden quiet pounded at Hatfield's head. . . .

Doc McGraw put in a busy half hour.

Jim Hatfield got out of the way. He went outside and stood on the front porch.

From downstreet, a group of armed townsmen came galloping noisily up, alarmed by the shooting. Hatfield went out to the boardwalk and talked to them, answered their curious questions. Presently the authority of his badge sent them away.

Back on the porch, a sudden gust of cool air struck him, and a few drops of rain spatted his arm, making him shiver. He felt an odd sense of peace.

When he returned to Doc's office, he found the place a shambles of people and wrecked glass. The Colonel sat quietly on the floor in a corner, smoking a poorly made cigarette and glaring at it, as if by glaring he could change it to a cigar.

Martha Ames helped Doc McGraw wrap long strips of bandage around George Tree's shoulder. Tree sat naked to the waist; his body gleamed with sweat. He winked at Hatfield and jerked his head toward Helen McGraw.

Helen curled slim legs on the floor, with Curly Baxter's head in her lap. She bent her head over Curly's face till her hair fell forward and touched his chin. She was kissing him.

There was a contented smile on Curly's

face. The widest smile he'd ever seen.

DOC McGRAW finished the bandage around Tree's shoulder, and stumped across the room. "You all right, Jim?"

Hatfield nodded. "Just a bruise on the arm. It ain't nothing. What's the score, Doc?"

Doc McGraw frowned and counted on his fingers. "Lemme see. George got a slug in the shoulder. Curly got creased top of the head. And one of the hunters got away, I reckon. That makes two patients for the Doc, and four for the undertaker. My undertaker business is picking up."

Doc pulled the neck of the calomel bottle out of the pocket of his white coat. Jagged shards of glass hung from it.

"Look there," Doc said. "Ain't that the devil? I'll have to take to beer. . . ."

By suppertime the wreckage had been cleared away, the dead men had been carried off. Supper was eaten, and plans were made. Cool rain drummed the roof as Helen and Martha carried supper dishes to the kitchen. Dark had come early.

The girls didn't wash the dishes. They stacked them in the sink, then came back to Doc's office. Hatfield sensed an odd unity among the little group. They wanted to be together for a while.

George Tree and Martha sat on the old kitchen table, holding hands. Curly Baxter reclined on a pillow against the wall, a white patch shining in his dark hair. Helen McGraw snuggled against his shoulder.

Doc McGraw had ordered a pitcher of beer and a box of cigars from the Red Rooster. He and the Colonel sat drinking beer out of white china mugs and smoking.

Hatfield leaned against the door and watched them all, smiling.

"Remember, George," the Colonel said, wiping beer foam from his mustache, "you'll be the boss, while I'm gone. I want everybody paid. Every bit of damage that was done I want replaced. All the busted windmills, the cut fences, the dynamited stock tanks—everything. I don't care if it ruins me."

George Tree grinned and slipped his arm around Martha. "It won't ruin you, Colonel. I won't let it. Martha and I might want to live with you, some day."

"I'd be proud," the Colonel said. "If—" The old man bit his lip and said no more.

Jim Hatfield stirred. He felt the eyes of everybody in the room swing toward him, as if seeking answer to the Colonel's unspoken question.

"Folks," Hatfield said gravely, "I know what you're thinking. How long will the Colonel be away. I don't know. But I'll do the best I can. When the trial comes up, I'll tell the truth, and the truth's in his favor. How he paid for all the damage, how he 'most got killed himself." Hatfield smiled. "I can't promise anything, but I think the State of Texas knows what it owes the Colonel."

Martha Ames jumped down off the kitchen table and ran to him. She was half-crying, half-laughing.

"Jim," she said, "after all you've done —the way you got Dad away from Foreman—the way you fought— Why, Jim Hatfield, you can do anything!"

Hatfield grinned at her. "Can I come to your wedding?"

"If you don't," she said, 'I'll—I'll—" She pulled Hatfield's head down and kissed him squarely on the mouth.

It was sweet. Hatfield's ears began to burn. Embarrassed, he pushed away and went to the window. He looked out. When he turned back, his face was sober.

"It's stopped raining, Colonel."

Colonel Ames stood up. "You want to go now, Jim?"

Hatfield said, "The horses are outside."

Colonel Ames nodded. His face was unlined and young-looking; he seemed contented, Hatfield thought. At peace with himself at last. The old man shook hands with Doc McGraw and George Tree and Curly. He kissed Martha and said, "I'll be back soon, girl."

Then the Colonel smiled at Hatfield.

"I'm ready, Jim."

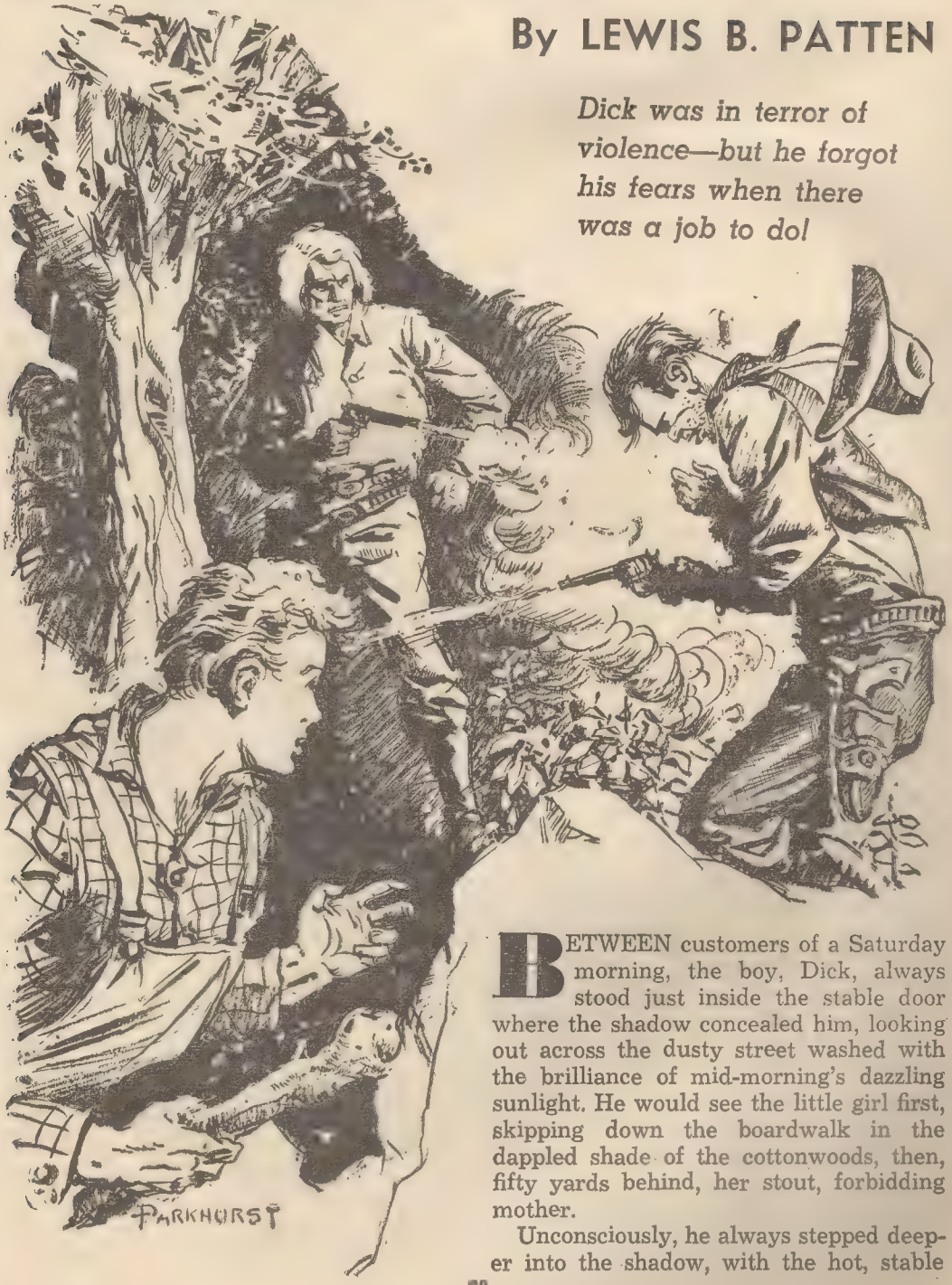
Hatfield said, "It'll be cool riding."

The Colonel said, "Good. I'll enjoy that, Jim." • • •

STABLE BOY

By LEWIS B. PATTEN

Dick was in terror of violence—but he forgot his fears when there was a job to do!



BETWEEN customers of a Saturday morning, the boy, Dick, always stood just inside the stable door where the shadow concealed him, looking out across the dusty street washed with the brilliance of mid-morning's dazzling sunlight. He would see the little girl first, skipping down the boardwalk in the dappled shade of the cottonwoods, then, fifty yards behind, her stout, forbidding mother.

Unconsciously, he always stepped deeper into the shadow, with the hot, stable

smell rank in his nostrils, a slight, wiry boy of ten, his face overly solemn from dreaming, his eyes large and brown and a little wistful. Above these eyes was a wide forehead, below, a nose, straight and tending to sharpness above a full and sensitive mouth.

At night, in his bed above the stable, he had often built situations in which the little girl was menaced by a runaway team, or a stampeding steer from a bunch being driven through town. He would, of course, rush to her rescue, miraculously not attired in dirty overalls, wonderfully not smelling of the stable. After that, she would wave and smile at him when she passed on the way down to her father's store. Sometimes, he would even go across the street and walk with her.

But this morning, there were no pauses between customers, and there was a tenseness and expectancy in the folks that streamed into town. Buckboards, buggies, and saddle horses lined out down the street for a hundred yards, and both the boy and his grandfather, old Paiute George, were kept running, unsaddling, unharnessing, leading horses into the cool stalls on either side of the long alleyway that ran the length of the stable.

There were fragments of talk that the boy caught, and they built an uneasy fear in him, who, six months before had witnessed a killing here in the runway of the stable, a killing that had bred in him an abnormal fear of violence. For the talk he heard was violent.

Dick knew, as did everyone, of the settlers' camp a mile south of town. He saw occasionally throughout the morning the scattering of hard-handed, tight-lipped men who brought their heavy wagons into the town, bought their flour and side-meat and beans, and drove immediately out again.

THEY were looking for a place to settle. The townsmen wanted them to stop here, and until a week ago there had been little opposition to this plan. But that was before Rufe Louthan and his vicious killer-rider started riding from ranch to ranch, talking trouble and bloodshed.

Near noon there was a lull, and the boy got himself a drink from the pump out front and sloshed water over his sweating face. Now that he was not so busy, the premonition of disaster fastened itself more tightly over him. And though the sun beat against his back, though he sweated from it and from exertion, along his spine was a cold streak and his feet and hands were clammy.

George Jones — "Paiute" everybody called him, though he had no Indian blood —was lean and stringy and a little stooped, but still a lot more active than most men of the town. His hair was white, a lion's mane of hair, straight as a string and nearly as coarse, that fell on both sides of his face, framing its leathery, sun-blackened darkness in a rather startling way. Ex-stage driver, ex-Army scout, presently stableman in the town of Chimney Rock, Paiute's seamed old face showed a vast and indifferent competence, and a wiseness in the ways of men that neither condemned, nor approved, but only observed.

Now Paiute, sixty on his last birthday, laid a shoulder against the timber that formed the stable door jamb and watched his grandson, deep concern in his bright, old eyes. Dick stuffed his shaking hands into his pockets, and walked, whistling soundlessly, past him through the door.

He busied himself cleaning stalls, and he pushed himself for he knew that in exertion was relief from the fear that dogged him. His ears, sharper this morning than usual, heard the approach of the townsmen and he peeked around the stall partition to watch them, attired in their ill-fitting, but carefully pressed, store-bought suits.

Now the thought of the clean and starched little girl came belatedly to his mind, for the leader of this group was her father, Sam Schofield, fat across the hips, narrow across the shoulders, too self-important for his small stature. But these details the boy did not see. What he saw was Sam Schofield's position in the community, the gulf that yawned between himself and the little girl because she was

the daughter of the town's leading merchant, he the grandson of a stableman.

Sam Schofield cleared his throat, and said, "Morning, Paiute," and wiping sweat from his balding brow, added, "Hot, ain't it? For this time of year anyhow." Something in his tone puzzled the boy, as did Paiute's polite indifference. He thought Paiute had ought to show a little more respect for Sam Schofield. And he wondered at Sam's apparent diffidence toward Paiute.

The boy worshipped Paiute. But now he muttered, "If only grandpaw was something besides a stableman. If only he'd wear suits like the other men. If only—" He shrugged philosophically. He'd never dream himself into a state of equality with Lula Schofield no matter how he tried.

Sam Schofield was saying importantly, "It's paramount," his lips lingered over the word, savored it, "that we get these people, these settlers, to stay. Business is getting bad enough that some of us are going to have to quit if somethin' ain't done."

The four men behind him nodded vigorously, babbling agreement. The boy listened, waited for Sam Schofield to go on. A big man, Sam. A boy could do worse than listen to him. Again, that peculiar deference in Sam's voice puzzled the boy, though he did not recognize it as deference.

Paiute rolled the wad of Star Plug to the other side of his mouth. "We can't make nobody do nothing," he said.

SAM showed a touch of asperity. "Rufe Louthan and Jay Seitz can. They got the cattlemen all stirred up in less than a week. They got the settlers convinced that they'd better move on or get ready for trouble. Until they went to work, most of the cattlemen didn't give a damn who settled the flats between here and the mountains. Ain't nothin' a cow can use out there, unless somebody gets water out on it. But it'd make wonderful farming country."

"Why are you coming to me?" asked Paiute. "I get most of my business from the cowmen. Nesters don't use a livery stable. Too tight. They'll stake their animals out down at the grove before they'll pay me two-bits or fifty cents for feeding 'em."

Sam swallowed, shuffled his feet. Dick thought, torn between his fear and his adolescent love for the little girl, 'Grandpaw, don't you go getting mixed up in this thing, but don't make 'em mad. Please don't make 'em mad.' If Paiute made Sam Schofield mad, the little girl, Lula, would blame Dick too, and so would her mother. But if Paiute agreed to help, it would be he standing in the swirling gun-smoke, in the terrible racket of roaring guns, not Sam Schofield, nor any of the others.

Panic closed down over Dick. In his mind was a picture of Rufe Louthan and his long-haired, pallid rider, Jay Seitz. Both of them sent shivers running down Dick's spine every time he saw them, Louthan swaggering along, glaring at everything, Jay slouching behind, and a little to one side, his pale face expressionless, his eyes and glance cold as a cat's, his hair nearly as long as a woman's and as shiny and carefully brushed. They reminded Dick of the killer who had left his victim still and bloody before Dick's eyes last winter.

Sam Schofield's Adam's apple bobbed ludicrously and his face lost some of its red, sweaty color. "We was hoping you'd talk to Rufe—and Jay, too."

Dick snorted, and felt cold. Talk. They didn't mean they wanted Paiute to talk—unless that talk was backed up with Paiute's gun. Sam fell a peg in Dick's esteem. He muttered, "Do your own dirty work. Let Paiute alone," and as he waited for Paiute's deliberate answer, again the panic closed in on him, and he wanted to run—anywhere—just to run and keep running until he had left this threat of violence far behind. He kept seeing the bloody, twisted face of the dying man lying in the stable runway while snow whirled in the doors, melting as it touched his face, the other man mounting, menacing them all with his gun, then riding out into the storm. An incident that a boy

should be able to forget—but couldn't.

Paiute spat. "Don't reckon I'll mix in. Ain't none of my affair." Dick's knees shook with relief. Paiute stood there looking calmly at the merchants, and they shuffled their feet, passed a few halting pleasantries, and hurried down the street.

Not long after, Rufe Louthan rode in and got down, settling the gun in his belt more comfortably. He said, "We figure to use the horses afore night. Not too much water."

Jay Seitz came through the door then, and the impulse to hide was strong in Dick. Paiute grunted at Louthan, and Dick knew he was irritated. Paiute never gave a horse more than enough water, or enough to impair its usefulness, even for a little while. Dick slouched over to take one of the horses, collided with Jay, swinging down. Jay laid his cold, pale eyes on Dick, and the boy shivered and broke into a sweat. There was something reptilian about Jay Seitz that made him shudder. He watched the slow motion of Jay's heavy guns, bumping against the man's thighs as he moved into the street.

Now the little girl came along the street, heading homeward, walking sedately beside her mother, who cast a glance full of angry resentment toward the stable. Dick forgot the horse he was holding, and stared hungrily. Lula was so small, and so clean, and her smile was so nice—when she smiled. Right now she looked scared.

Paiute said, "Pretty little filly, ain't she, Dick?" His eyebrow was raised, his glance one of amused tolerance as though there were no gulf between Dick and the girl. Dick blushed and Paiute chuckled. They unsaddled the horses. The noon bell rang in the cupola over the feed store. Paiute said, "Watch things. I'll be back as soon as I eat. Then you can go," and cuffed Dick's shoulder roughly. Dick sat down in the shade of the stable and now his fear was less because he figured that the violence would not touch them here.

ACROSS the pole corral to the north, he heard voices and, looking up, saw Rufe Louthan sitting on the top rail, talking down at another cowman, one from the Sugarloaf Valley, fifty miles away. Louthan's voice was hot and hurried and intolerant.

"That's damn fool's talk, Ross," Louthan said. "Maybe this bunch won't get close enough to hurt your range. But there'll be another bunch after this one—and another. They'll keep crowding in until a cow can't turn around without scratching herself on bob wire. I say let's get on our horses and go out to their camp in a bunch. When they see they're going to have to face bullets, they'll leave fast enough!"

Dick had heard talk—a boy can hear a lot of talk around a stable that no one else can—that Rufe Louthan and Jay threw a wide loop, that they had more calves than they could possibly raise out of the cows they had, even with a hundred percent increase every year. And even Dick knew that a man don't want a lot of people cluttering up the horizon when he's burning his brand on another man's calf. Dick guessed that was why Louthan and Jay were so dead set against homesteaders in the valley when nobody else seemed to care.

He saw the blaze of white coming down the street that was Paiute's mane of hair, saw it pause beside Louthan and Ross. He heard Paiute's voice, full of casual indifference, saying, "This country needs them settlers, Rufe. You let 'em alone. I'm going out there with the rest of the merchants this afternoon to tell 'em it's all right to stay." His voice had none of the sound of a challenge, yet Dick knew it was, all the same—even with Paiute's outward casualness.

He saw the flush building up in Louthan's face and neck, even as he wondered what had changed Paiute's mind. Dick froze with fear as Louthan jumped down off the fence, put his hand on the gun butt at his waist threateningly, took it off again, spread his legs and bellowed, "By God, me and Jay'll be sitting across the trail when you do!"

Paiute's eyes narrowed only a little, his lips thinned out hardly noticeably. But his

voice cut through the air like a quirt for all its softness, "Don't touch that gun again, sonny, unless you aim to use it!"

Louthan's face went pale and Dick sat frozen with fear as time ticked away. He could feel the chill of that day two years ago, could feel the bite of the wind and the driving snow.

Then Louthan growled, "Not right now. Not right now," and whirled, stamping down the street toward the restaurant and the backing of Jay Seitz.

Paiute grinned at Ross and moved on toward the stable. Dick's hands were shaking and his stomach had an aching emptiness to it. But he fought himself for control, so that Paiute might not see.

He asked, "Why'd you go and change your mind, gran'paw? You told Schofield no."

"Didn't like Jay Seitz's talk up to the restaurant. Don't like to see one man running a whole country. You go on down and eat. I paid for your dinner."

Dick washed at the horse trough, wiped face and hands on a large, blue bandana. He went down to the Chinaman's dingy restaurant, halted abruptly as he saw Jay Seitz's long hair and Louthan's beefy, red face through the open door. Then, swallowing, he went firmly inside, sat at the counter two seats from Seitz, felt the man's vicious glance on him, but looked determinedly straight ahead.

Seitz and Louthan had been talking; now they were silent. Dick, who lacked an appetite, attacked his roast beef and fried spuds as though he were hungry. But before he was halfway done, Seitz said plainly, "Let's go, Rufe. I got an idea."

Relief stirred in the boy. Looking back, out through the door, he saw the two of them pause, stare across the street. Following their glances, Dick saw Lula Schofield, alone, hurrying out of Mrs. Connors' white frame shack with the sign, *Sewing*, done in needlepoint on the window curtain.

LOUTHAN and Seitz separated, with Louthan going toward the stable, Seitz crossing the street, following Lula, out of Dick's sight.

"They wouldn't dare hurt her!" he thought, and, half convinced, finished his meal, afterwards his dessert of dried-apple cobbler. Then he went out, cut through the weed-grown lot next to the Chinaman's place. He was thinking of the pool of stagnant rainwater out behind the corrals, of the frogs there that he'd been trying to catch. He knew he had a few minutes before Paiute would expect him back, or need him.

A buckboard was halted down in the dry wash than ran from the Chinaman's place to the creek, and curiosity stirred in Dick. He moved closer, trying to fix ownership of the rig in his mind. He succeeded, knowing it for one of Paiute's rental rigs, just as Jay Seitz stepped up from a crouch behind it, and said softly, "Come here, kid."

Dick tensed to run, his fear stiffening his muscles. Then he saw the struggling, canvas-wrapped bundle of something in the back of the rig. He wanted to run, but seemed frozen, held here by an awful dread that paralyzed him. Jay was suddenly up out of the wash and his cruel fingers cut into the boy's arm, stopping the yell on Dick's lips. "I said come here, you damn little brat!"

Dick struggled, but Jay's arms were like vises, and he felt the canvas enveloping him, the quick-tightening loops of lariat rope being thrown around his body. He yelled, frantic with terror, but the sound only deafened him there inside the canvas, not carrying at all outside it. He was thrown roughly into the buckboard, and the rig jolted down the wash, across the creek, and out along the road across the valley. Once, it pulled up for a moment, and Dick heard Jay's voice, "Got 'em both, Rufe. Old Paiute and Schofield will toe the mark now. Leastways Schofield will. We got other plans fer Paiute, ain't we Rufe?" And he laughed, a cruel, mirthless laugh that brought the sweat out all over Dick's body.

Dreading his answer, Dick rolled as close as he could to the other bundle in the buckboard, asked shakily, "Who is it?"

Only a sob answered him, choked and muffled, but plain enough that his suspicions were confirmed. Lula Schofield.

Plans. What plans did they have for Paiute? And what plans did they have for him and Lula? Something told him they'd never let them go. No man could kidnap a child on the frontier—and live.

After a while they drew up, and Jay unwrapped them. Lula started screaming and tried to run. Jay caught her, cuffed her viciously on the side of the head, sent her sprawling into the dirt.

Dick knew later that if he had thought about it he would never have done it. Impulsively, he rushed at Jay, leaped astride his back, clawing at his face, pounding his small fists on the man's head and neck. He was screaming his hysterical rage, when Jay flung him off, kicked out savagely.

Pain ran from Dick's ribs along his leg, up to his shoulder and into his head. Jay's contorted face swam dizzily before his eyes. He tried to get up. Jay kicked him again. "Get up, you little fool, and hop into the shack before I take a quirt to you."

Dick struggled to his feet, staggered into the log shack where some hopeful soul had tried to go it alone and without water years before. Lula crouched, whimpering, in the corner. The soiled, crumpled condition she was in shocked him momentarily. It had never occurred to him, ever, that she could get as dirty as he, given the chance. This way, he liked her better than ever.

His own fear seemed lessened in the face of hers. He said stoutly, "Paiute'll be along pretty soon. He'll show that Jay Seitz!"

BUT again the recollection of that winter day two years ago came up to haunt him, and now, the bloody dying face on the floor did not belong to a stranger. It belonged to Paiute. Again, Dick shuddered.

Lula, feeling that tremor, whispered doubtfully, "You won't let him hurt us, will you, until Paiute gets here?" and slipped her hand into his.

Dick muttered without conviction, "He just better not try, that's all!"

Were it not for the fear that lurked outside, this would have been heaven for Dick. For this was the substance of his dreams made real. No longer was Lula the starched and distant daughter of Sam Schofield. The gulf had miraculously narrowed and Dick had stepped across it. He stared with unbelief as Lula murmured shyly, "I wish I was like you. I wish my pa was like Paiute. I wish I could get dirty and play in puddles. You're awful lucky."

The sudden realization struck Dick that he, himself, had made the gulf between them by his own sense of inferiority. In reality it had never existed. The little girl was just as envious of him as he was of her.

But there was still the sinister silence of Jay Seitz, outside. There was the waiting, and the doubt, and the numbing fear.

The sun dropped, the sky grew red, and cool air drifted in through the shack's kicked-out windows and sagging door. Only once in a while did Jay stick his head in, scowling impatience in his cruel eyes. Once, Dick heard him mutter, "Wish Rufe would come, damn him!"

At dusk, Rufe did come, saying in his husky whisper, "I'll get in the shack with the rifle. You're like an Indian in the brush. You circle, try and pick him off as he comes in."

Paiute. They were fixing to ambush Paiute. Dick's mind, though filled with terror, was racing. It all fitted. They had rented a rig down at Paiute's stable, knowing that when they both disappeared with it, and the children disappeared, Paiute would immediately know who had them. They had probably left a trail, not too plain, for Paiute to follow—deviations every so often from the tracks in the heavily traveled road—maybe a small stick of brush trailing from the rig.

Louthan had been watching the back trail, had not come here until he had seen Paiute coming.

The sense of time running away, too

fast, oppressed Dick. His nerves tensed against the crack of a pistol from outside. Louthan came in the door, struck a match, peering over at the two kids. "Keep quiet now," he growled softly, "or I'll give you something to make you sleep."

Dick started shivering, though the cabin was not cold. His teeth chattered audibly no matter how hard he clenched his jaws. Fear. It got hold of you and it never let go. It hounded you as long as you lived? No! As long as you let it.

With his mind running this way, it seemed to Dick that the shaking subsided a little. Then Lula timidly put her hand out, found his, and clutched it. "What they going to do to us?" she whispered.

Abruptly, it struck Dick that he had hardly thought of that. So it wasn't fear for himself that was bothering him. It was fear of guns—of the stench of powder-smoke—of the look of dying men, that terrified him. And while he lay there shivering it was coming ever closer, closer as Paiute came closer, blindly into the ambush.

He thought of how he could help. Overpower these two men? No. He knew that to be impossible. Warn Paiute? That was the only way. He whispered, "Be quiet now," and disengaged his hand from that of Lula.

He could see the blob of blackness over the door. That was Rufe Louthan. He crept slowly, inch by inch, toward the man, fearing to risk escape by the windows because of the noise. If he could creep past Rufe, dive into the blackness—

NEARER Rufe came. He could smell the liquor now on Rufe's breath. Now! Now! He darted past Rufe, heard the man's startled shout, then burst out the door. He dived to the ground, scrambling along, then rolling. Flame licked out of the doorway behind him, sound racketed along the ground toward him. For an instant, fear immobilized him. Then he was up, running, yelling, "Paiute! It's an ambush! They're waiting for you!"

He heard the slithering, swift approach of feet toward him, the stirring the brush made from the swift passage of a man. Jay. The cold clutched at Dick again, and he crouched in a clump of greasewood, waiting in silent, hard-breathing terror.

No answer from Paiute. But there were the formless sounds about Dick, the sounds of rabbits disturbed, of chipmunks scratching in dead leaves. One of those sibilant sounds was not a wild creature, but Jay Seitz, who moved like an Indian in the brush.

Jay's voice came out of the darkness, soft and vicious, "Damn you kid! Come out here," and wheedling, "I ain't fixing to hurt you. Come on now."

Jay was close. Not more than thirty feet away. Dick made his breathing stop.

Now another rustling commenced off to the south, away from Jay, and Dick heard the man slip past him, so close that the rank odor of tobacco and whiskey and stale sweat filled his nostrils. He thought, "That's Paiute over there, and if I don't do somethin', Jay'll get him." He felt the dread of moving in him, and knew that when he did move, Jay would have him located.

Paiute's soft call came out of the velvet dark, "Dick. That you?" giving away his position, giving Jay his chance. Suddenly Dick was up on his feet, running blindly toward the sound, yelling, "Look out! Look out, grandpa!" He had gone perhaps twenty feet when his foot tangled in a sagebrush root and he dived, sprawling, ahead. His shoulder hit something solid. A man grunted, and landed solidly on top of him. Dick didn't wait to see if he had bowled over Jay or his grandfather. He scrambled frantically to get away.

The moon came out from behind a cloud and Dick could see Jay, struggling to get up, and his grandfather not ten feet away, the old Navy Colt clutched in his weathered hand. Dick yelled, "Shoot, grandpa!"

Paiute snorted at Jay, "Lay quiet, Seitz, you dirty, murdering kid-butcher. If you move, I'll kill you!"

Dick bawled frantically, "Shoot him, grandpa, before he shoots you!" with the thought of Rufe Louthan, somewhere, coming closer, foremost in his mind.

Paiute said in a voice so soft that Dick could hardly hear, "No. Wait a bit. I been watching this rooster swaggering around the country for quite a spell now. He's tough—ain't you, Jay? A gunman. A killer."

Jay was up on one elbow. "Ain't you?" Paiute roared.

Jay snarled, "You wouldn't be so damn tough if I was on my feet and you didn't have a gun in your hand."

Paiute breathed, "Ah. I hoped you'd say that. All right. Get up."

Jay climbed carefully to his feet, his hands in sight and held away from his body. Assurance came back to him, and arrogance. But still he stalled, waiting for Rufe to come up behind Paiute. Forestalling that, Paiute circled. Then abruptly, Paiute shoved the gun into its holster at his side, snapped his hands outward to the position in which Jay held his.

"Now," breathed Paiute. "Let's show this boy how tough a tough gunman is. I think you're a rattler without fangs. I think you're yellow. You're stallin' right now, waiting for Rufe to come up behind and finish me off. Ain't you, you damn punk killer?"

A SECOND ticked by, two. Then Jay's hand darted to his holster, and in a motion blurred by speed, came up with a gun that spit orange flame as it leveled. But an instant before it did, the corner of Dick's eye caught a flash from where Paiute stood, and his ears heard a peculiar, slapping sound as the bullet tore into Jay's chest.

Now, Louthan's progress was easily followable as he lunged toward them, and the flame from Pauite's gun pointed in that direction, answered immediately by Louthan's.

Suddenly Rufe bellowed with pain and went crashing to his knees.

A long sigh went out of Paiute. He said softly, "Never was a horse that couldn't be rode—nor a rider that couldn't be throwed. Jay's had this country half scared to death for almost a year, but a gunman ain't ever so tough as he pretends to be because half of his success depends on keeping folks scared. That'd be a good thing for a kid to remember, even if it only made him hold his back a little straighter."

Dick was able to look down at the two dead men by the light of the fire Paiute had lighted without the sickness coming into his body. And all the way back into town the warm, moist hand of Lula nestled in his own.

But best of all, Pauite's voice, speaking to Dick, held a strong pride. He said, "You've been a scared boy ever since that killing last winter. Scared as you was, you ran out there to warn me. That took real guts, boy. You'll do."

Fear held you as long as you let it. When you stopped letting it, you felt sort of airy—and free—and big.

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"Hands high!" one of the bandits warned

CATCH YOUR KILLER

By FRED GROVE

SHERIFF LEE RAND rode inside the pole corral behind the sheriff's office, dismounted stiffly and watered his horse at the planked trough. He was jerking at the cinch when he heard the strung-out undertone of men moving along the street. He peeled off the saddle and sweat-crusted blanket, slipped the gelding's bridle and hung up the rigging. Then he stalked to the office and he hauled

Charlie Big Sick, Osage Angler, Couldn't Resist Hooking a Likely Fish!

up abruptly, grinning widely to himself.

Lumped in a chair, Charlie Big Sick was fast asleep, snoring in snorting, raveling gusts, his long braids sliding as he nodded. It was the middle of June, but he had wrapped an orange-striped blanket around his broad body. A blood-red rooster feather reared from the round-topped hat. One brown hand gripped a beaded buckskin bag and looping his neck was a rawhide thong anchored to a cow horn, year-yellowed, worn smooth. Between his knees was a carved hickory cane.

All mighty proper, Lee thought, for an Osage medicine man. Even to the string of fish hooks rimming the rattlesnake hat band. As Lee's bootheels scraped, the snoring snapped off and the old fullblood stirred, blinked, mild eyes the muddy sheen of strong coffee.

"Catfish bitin'?" Lee asked gently. Big Sick's determined but futile wooing of Salt Creek's catfish was a standing joke in Antelope Springs.

"Sign no good." Big Sick licked thick lips in a high-boned, Roman-nosed face. "But me catch 'em yet." He was grinning now.

"Yeah," Lee grunted, his good humor gone. "Your luck's about like mine." Watching the front door, he realized what was coming — Tracy Bullard. He had sensed it for weeks. He had read it between the lines of Trinkle's weekly newspaper—Kate Trinkle's now that old Tom had passed on—the *Oklahoma War Chief*. He could feel it now in the deliberate tramp of boots, in the rising mutter of men's voices.

With a straight-backed dignity, Tracy Bullard swung inside first and Lee straightened. Bullard was a thin wedge of a man, angular and loose of joint, with a slack-jawed face and the jumpy, bargaining eyes of a traveling horse trader.

IN HIS Prince Albert coat and plug hat, Bullard cut a fine figure among the town's tobacco-chewing, booted gentry and blanketed Osages. Only a year ago he had drifted in from back East and opened a law office. A convincing talker, he had soon established himself as a manager of men, and awed citizens had elected him mayor.

"Heard the news, sir?" Bullard's voice was soft and low-toned, but it carried a challenge. He stood stiffly erect. Behind him Lee saw men gawking, and he caught the stubby shape of Duff Shaner, the Black Dog Hills rancher.

"Been beatin' the brush," Lee said. "But I got an idea."

"Well"—the mayor thrust out his chin —"they did it again. Only this morning, sir. Caught poor Johnny Strack coming through Wildhorse Gap. Cleaned out the Big V outfit's payroll. Manhandled the passengers." Bullard scowled and his voice trailed off, half-choked. "Johnny's dead—shotgunned twice. A most brutal act . . . Folks are beginning to talk—even Editor Trinkle."

"Too bad about Johnny." Regretfully Lee was thinking of likeable, reckless Johnny Strack, who had yowled the Salt Creek stage from the Osage country to the Kansas line town of Yellow Hand. "He's been helping. Rode with me when he wasn't driving. We looked hard. No luck, but they'll make a mistake yet. Wait and see."

"Wait!" Bullard threw up a protesting hand, his face to the crowd, sneering, outraged. "As spokesman for the good citizens of Antelope Springs, I demand action. Not tomorrow—but today—now! Eight holdups in three months and you say wait. Damned if we will—you've got to do something!"

Angry growls chorused from the packed crowd and Lee saw Duff Shaner step forward, a hint of stored-up trouble in his square body. For Shaner was Lee's opponent in the coming July election, openly chosen and backed by the Honorable Tracy Bullard.

"Lee him damn fine sheriff."

It was Charlie Big Sick's deep, grunting voice and Lee turned. The Osage's hands were knuckle-ridged on the hickory cane, his eyes stonily defiant.

Lee said, "Thanks, but stay out of this,

Charlie," and whipped back. He had a closed-in feeling, a rankling resentment against second-guessing, complaining towners. Lee had been without a deputy for weeks and, knowing it was bad politics, he had scorned the gesture of a city-manned posse as slow, awkward, useless. In this stretching land of rock-rimmed ridges, blue-stem prairie and timbered hills, a man could hide forever from noisy, bungling riders. And Tip Wall, his deputy, still couldn't straddle a horse. It was a funny sickness, Lee thought, that kept a strong man abed so long.

"Bullard's right," Shaner announced. "If this keeps up, Antelope Springs'll be ruined. People got a right to protection." He swung thick, sloping shoulders. "We'll get it after the election."

This was his little piece for benefit of the crowd, Lee knew bleakly, and it rang true. Black-browed with work-toughened hands, Shaner looked hard, capable. He had a restless way of turning his muscled fighter's body. He was making an impressive show.

Lee's voice was dry, bitter, "Nice speech—and maybe you'll get the chance."

"He will," Bullard cut in roughly. "You've had yours. You're already a dead duck." There was a pleased expression in the pale eyes when he turned, calling, "Let's go."

As Bullard wheeled, Lee saw Big Sick still hunched in the chair. His nut-brown, wrinkled face was mask-like, fixed. He seemed to be gazing beyond the grumbling men. Then Lee noticed the hickory cane. It slanted out like a brown snake in front of Bullard's boots. There was a scuffling sound, and he fell in a spread-out, awkward sprawl. Instantly, he whirled up, sputtering, face crimson.

"You!" he roared at Big Sick, "you did that!"

"Huh?" Big Sick's head tilted. For a second his eyes showed a flashing hardness, then he pulled back the cane. "White man's foots too big," he grunted, peering down in concern. "Watch where walk next time. Maybe bust medicine stick."

"You red—" Bullard's bony fists knotted, his careful dignity lost in the furious wash of a whiplash anger. His arm jerked back.

BEFORE Lee realized it, he was lunging. He caught the raised arm, twisted, heard Bullard's yell.

"Get out!" Lee ordered. "The whole damned bunch!"

Bullard was struggling, his face pained, and Lee let go so suddenly that Bullard fell backward against a man. It came swiftly to Lee that he had made the worst possible play here. But his own built-up anger was goading him in wild, gusty impulses.

"Clear out!" he repeated harshly.

"I wasn't going to hit him," Bullard argued.

A red-faced townsman raised a blunt, clenched fist. Duff Shaner was moving over but Bullard waved him to a halt.

"We'll go," Bullard growled through his teeth. "And you, sir—you'd better start looking for a new job."

Bony shoulders upthrust, Bullard whipped out of the office. The others followed, shuffling and grumbling. Shaner's leathery face was a frozen picture of malice.

Watching them go, Lee realized that more than a county election was at stake. Raw, rank murder had glinted from the chilled surface of Bullard's flinty stare. For Big Sick, too. And Bullard was smooth. With Shaner siding him, it could get rough for a man caught deep in the timber, boxed in a rocky canyon. And there was something else—a half-paid-for ranch in the hunkering, grass-rich hills. Worth fighting for and the reason Lee had buckled on lawman's irons to pay it off. Solemn, he swung around, but he couldn't hide his grin.

"Funny," he said, "how clumsy some folks are."

"Luck still bad." Charlie Big Sick shook his broad head regretfully. "No break neck."

Slowly, ponderously, the Indian stood up, catching the bright blanket around him. There was a rugged and enduring

quality about the old man that Lee had always liked. He was a rooted part of the blackjack-studded hills, immovable, like stone. But Lee caught a troubled glimmer in the straight, unblinking stare.

"You," Big Sick grunted, "you got to catch 'em now."

Soberly Lee watched the fullblood pad away, the cane tapping. Big Sick was right—dead right. But it would take some extra good bait. Lee stepped outside and saw that the crowd had broken up, drifting to Bullard's office. This was reservation country, bone dry, and Bullard kept a bottle handy for the politically faithful. Lee was crossing the street, thinking of thick-armed Tip Wall, when he saw a flutter of skirts in the doorway of the War Chief office.

Kate Trinkle saw him at once, checked herself, and he went across to her. There was a question in her wide-spaced eyes.

"You heard?" Lee asked.

She nodded. "I was going to see you. This means more trouble, Lee. You want to make a statement for the paper?"

Straight-faced, Lee considered her, feeling a traveling uneasiness. He guessed the trouble was Miss Kate thought of herself as a newspaper editor first, a woman last. Like old fire-eating Tom, she took editorial duties seriously. Much too seriously for somebody with the biggest gray-green eyes Lee had ever seen, and a full, rich mouth that stirred a man. Ink smudged the tip of her small chin, wind whipped her copper-colored hair and Lee caught the clean scent of soap. She moved slim shoulders impatiently, with a twist. She took a restless breath and Lee saw the soft swell of her blouse.

"Why," he said patiently, "just say I'm doing the best I can. Like the one-legged man in the foot race."

"That won't do." Her face was severe, almost reproachful. "People want to know how you intend to correct the situation."

"Correct it?" he flared. "You sound like Bullard. Just tell 'em Fearless Lee Rand is still on his stickhorse, riding the ridges, beating the brush" — her eyes were stormy, but he went on—"that he hasn't made a capture since the Peabody boys burned down the schoolhouse."

"Want me to print that?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

KATE spoke with quick exasperation: "Lee, you're a thick-headed, stubborn—" Her voice broke off.

"—mule's the word," he cut in.

"It's getting worse." Her face turned grave, serious. "I'm just trying to help. You know what happened to Johnny Strack. That's the first killing—that starts it. It's a wonder there haven't been more. They pistol-whipped an old man today when he tried to hide a ring. The passengers gave me good descriptions."

"Yeah." Lee shrugged. "I know: three men wearing flop-brimmed hats, red bandanas for masks, shotguns-jeans-shirts-boots-spurs-hands-feet."

"You're making fun of me." Her voice was sharp.

"Anything but," he said grimly. "That description would fit a hundred men. Nothing to go on. All I can say is I don't believe in big talk. Better do something first, but they tell me my time is running out."

"I'm worried," she said, frowning. "The government is making a payment next week to the Osages. It's for part of the tribe's Kansas land. It'll be in cash and come by stage to the agent's office here. It mean a lot of money in the merchants' pockets. Yet—"

"Might be a good idea to run it."

All at once she was indignant. "So everybody will know!"

"That's why it's a good idea."

"You're not telling me how to run my paper, Lee Rand. You can't even handle your own office!" Her head snapped up and she whirled around abruptly and, with her eyes flashing indignation, she walked away from him.

Lee moved down the street, heading for the two-room house along the creek where Tip Wall, his deputy, lived. As he came up, he saw a horse fiddling in a corral, heard the tunk-tunk of ax blade against wood, the strokes steady, powerful. They

quit suddenly and when Lee stepped behind the house, a broad-backed man was stacking wood. The man looked up, a sheepish grin on his bearded face.

"Hello, Lee," he said.

"Looks like you're feeling all right again," Lee grinned, eyes on the two-bladed ax, the pile of fresh-cut chunks thick as a man's leg. "Hope you're ready to ride. I need you."

Tip Wall dropped his chin and coughed faintly. It seemed an odd weakness in so powerfully built a man.

"And me still with the miseries," Wall complained, his voice strained. "Just trying to toughen up so I can ride." He was slow-moving, slow-talking and Lee had found him sullen at times, yet reliable in a stolid way. His head was a blunt, bushy-browed wedge resting on thickly muscled neck and shoulders.

"Hear about Johnny Strack?"

Wall shook his enormous head. "Nobody ever comes here but you."

Lee told him about the robbery and Wall muttered, "That's bad—killing."

"That's not all," Lee snapped. "If we don't come up with something soon, we're out of a job."

Wall was staring, an uneasy look in the shallow eyes. Groaning, he picked up an armful of wood. When he straightened, there was a dogged expression in his wide face.

"Nothin' I can do," he grumbled. "Maybe in a few weeks."

"Time's runnin' out." Resentment was running through Lee and he said coldly, "Too late then. I figure a man able to swing that hog-killer can hold down the office. Help a little."

"You—you doubting that I'm a sick man?" Wall stiffened and a meaty hand slid across a piece of stove wood. Lee felt his muscles grow rigid, saw the streaky wildness in the eyes.

"A sick man—no." Then Lee said it, blurted it out, "But you're faking!"

Wall's lips were working. His hand clamped onto the chunk of wood as he threw down his load and Lee saw the swinging club. He ducked, heard the swift, vicious swish past his face. Wall whirled, came at him wild-eyed, muttering, feet stamping. And Lee knew.

"Remember, you're sick!" he yelled.

SOMETHING smashed and tore into his shoulder, rocked him back. Wall's broad body was dancing crazily before his eyes. He lunged and drove his fist into the hard belly, heard the quick, throaty grunt. Lee's left arm seemed numb, useless. Wall was whipping the club again. Lee threw up his right arm. As he moved, the world seemed to explode. Daylight faded. His feet couldn't find bottom. He was struggling up, but he couldn't see through the closed-in darkness. . . .

Light broke raggedly across Lee's eyes later when he groaned and awoke, flat on his back. He stirred. Pain whipped through his left shoulder and arm in steady, pulsing waves. His head throbbed, felt knotted, swollen. His shirt was ripped and bloody. It came to him slowly that it was almost dark. The fight, he remembered, had started in full light. Teeth clenched, he pushed up on his right hand, looked around. Tip Wall was gone. So was the horse from the corral.

With a grunt, he wobbled up, head whirling. But it took a while before he could get up and walk. He kept thinking desperately of the army cot and bucket of water in the back room of the office. Dragging toward town, he realized that he didn't want to be seen like this. It was pride and it was business. A beat-up sheriff already down on his luck wouldn't draw sympathy in hard-crusted Antelope Springs. There would be questions that Lee couldn't answer, and something far back in his mind told him that he'd need plenty of time.

When he came to the first row of board houses, he angled in behind them, cut down a can-littered alley. Evening's first lights blinked like yellow, groping fingers. They made a flickering, wavering pattern to his glazed eyes and the rough ground kept rolling under his

feet. It seemed a long time before he heard the growing murmur of Main Street. Then the corral loomed up, the shape of his horse high-shouldered in the half light. The gelding's head moved. Against the barked poles, Lee caught the rustle of loose hay being nuzzled. He was reaching for the blacked-out rear door of the office when it occurred to him that he hadn't thrown in the hay.

He fumbled awkwardly for the edge of the cot, found it. Pitching forward, he heard a cautious grunt from the corner. Fear touched the back of his neck. He tried to lunge up, but his muscles were all water.

"Maybe you hurt?"

Relief swam through Lee as he recognized the low-toned voice of Charlie Big Sick. A match scraped and Lee saw the old Indian's leather-brown eyes, questioning, troubled. Charlie lighted a coal oil lamp.

"Ran into a chunk of hickory," Lee groaned. "Tip Wall was swinging it." He saw Big Sick digging into his buckskin bag. After a moment, he pulled out a handful of brown, wrinkled leaves.

"You sleep," the Osage ordered. "Me fix. You beat up purty bad."

He drew a long-bladed knife from under his blanket. With quick slashes, he cut off Lee's torn shirt. Through bleary eyes Lee saw him fashioning wide strips. Shuffling, the fullblood waddled over to the water bucket on the low wooden bench and soaked the cloths. Lee jerked when Big Sick layered the bruised shoulder and arm with the leaves, bound them loosely with the dripping bandages into a cool, soppy poultice.

"What's this?" Lee grumbled.

"Big medicine," the Indian grunted, pleased. "Work on Indian—white man, too."

All at once the room was swaying strangely. Big Sick's blanketed shape seemed to turn and tilt, out of focus. "We're going fishing, Charlie," Lee heard his own voice, high and hoarse, with the swirling, streaky blackness shuttering him in again . . .

It was daylight beyond the cheap, cracked window shades and Lee was staring at the ceiling. He kept remembering the ghostly, towering form of the old Indian scuffling across the thin flooring. But Big Sick had gone. And clear in Lee's mind was the mean cut of Tip Wall's bearded mouth as he swung the murderous sledge. With it, Lee felt an urgency, a sense of lost time. The shock traveled slowly through him. This was press day for Kate Trinkle's newspaper and maybe he was already too late.

FROWNING, Lee half-turned on the cot, expecting a sickening rush of pain. His arm responded stiffly, with an ache that flogged his entire body. Sweat dampened his forehead. But he could move. He sat up and stared down at the crudely bandaged arm in pleased amazement. Big Sick didn't prescribe according to the white man's medical books, but there was a looseness in the arm and shoulder muscles now. And he was hungry. Cautiously, he stood up, looking around him.

He saw the scarred bureau by the wash stand. Dizziness hit him again when he rummaged for a clean shirt. Afterward, he stepped out into the blazing sun, blinking. He hooked the swollen left hand in his belt, yanked down the hat to cover his bruised face. Slow-footed, he angled down the street to the printing office. He felt the hurry in the place as he went inside.

Miss Kate was reading a galley proof on the office counter. In the rear, a stoop-shouldered printer was hand-setting type. She looked up reluctantly. He saw her eyes take him in, widen with astonishment.

"Lee!" she burst out. "What happened?" The concern in her voice turned him awkward, and his weakness slid back.

"Horse fell with me," he said, trying to appear casual. "You gone to press yet?"

"Just getting ready—soon as I read these proofs."

Lee swallowed hard, knowing she'd storm. "I wish you'd run that story about Indian payment," he said quickly.

"I thought we went over that," she answered in a low, stubborn tone.

"Listen," Lee argued. "You didn't give me a chance to finish." Kate stood very straight, her mouth firm, and he noticed the smooth, white column of her throat. "It sounds crazy, but that money is bait. They'll read about it in the paper. It'll bring them out in the open where—"

"—they can get it," she snapped. "I won't do it!"

"But I'll stop 'em!"

For an instant, he saw an odd change in her eyes. A brief uneasiness, but there was mockery there, too, and suddenly he was fighting a resentful anger.

"You wouldn't stand a chance," she said and he was aware of her steady stare. "You can't ride and it's only two days till the payment comes in."

"We'll see," Lee gritted. He was turning when a tall, bony figure filled the doorway.

With a wide sweep of his hand, Tracy Bullard lifted his shiny plug hat and smiled grandly for Miss Kate. Lee felt a grudging annoyance at the courtesy. He started to move on. But Bullard's eyes were scanning his bruised face and Lee flushed.

"Why, Sheriff!" Bullard said. "You've been hurt."

Miss Kate spoke up before Lee could answer, "A horse fell with him."

"You mean on him," Bullard said skeptically. "I'm sorry to hear it, sir. Particularly at this time. With you in the middle of a campaign and hunting the hills for criminals. But you still have help. There's Mr. Wall."

"Used to," Lee growled. "He's gone. Left town."

"Oh." Bullard made a clucking sound. "Too bad, sir."

"Don't sir me! You know damn well you're glad I'm short-handed."

Bullard pulled back, startled. He swung his glance from Lee to Kate and back again. "Why," he sputtered, straightening, "I was simply expressing my regret."

"Sure," Lee said with loud sarcasm, "and I'll bet you can tell me where Wall hid out."

"I don't understand. How would I know—where?"

"Duff Shaner's ranch." It was a wild guess, Lee realized, and Bullard's expression didn't change. Lee faced Miss Kate. "Maybe you'll run that in your paper."

HER face flamed and he knew that he shouldn't have said it. Sore in a hot, raging way, he turned his back and went outside. He walked to the office, weak, disgusted, hurting. Soon hunger rolled through him and he plodded to a cafe, ate hurriedly and came back.

When Charlie Big Sick shuffled in, Lee growled from the cot, "It's no use. Won't be any fishing party—no bait." He wondered why he even mentioned it to the Indian who was too old to help, yet it felt good to talk to somebody who'd listen. Big Sick looked puzzled and Lee said, "Indian payment was coming in. All cash. I figured a story in the paper would flush out the outlaw band with the greeners. I'd planned to be on the stage when it left Yellow Hand. But Miss Kate won't oblige. Thinks it's better to keep it quiet. Maybe she's right."

"How you catch 'em?"

"Charlie, I'm through. It'll be up to Shaner—later."

"Maybe."

Big Sick's grunting voice came drowsily to Lee. He was almost asleep when the Osage went out, the cane tapping. It floated in Lee's mind that he'd have to go on trying. That the only style he knew was to ride the fat off a horse. About dark he heard the Indian's rapping approach. He stayed only a few seconds and Lee, too bone-weary to talk, drifted back to sleep. Lee got up long after daybreak, his feet dragging with dread when he thought of another pounding ride. He was belting on the heavy gun when he saw the newspaper.

It was spread out by his hat and he wondered why he hadn't noticed it before. "Now Charlie's even delivering the paper," he muttered. He was grabbing the hat as his eyes caught the headline. The heavy black lines jumped in his vision: INDIAN PAYMENT DUE THIS WEEK. There was the story under it, just as he'd asked Kate to run it.

The gun slapping against his thigh, he crossed to the *War Chief* office. Only the bent-shouldered printer was there, and Lee felt a twinge of disappointment.

"Where's Kate?" he asked.

The printer looked up from his type case. "Gone. Early this morning."

"Where to?"

"Said somethin' about hiring a fast rig." He grinned indulgently. "You know Kate, she's tight-lipped."

As he rode away, it kept drumming through Lee's mind that things were shaping up now. He'd ride to Yellow Hand, board the stage tomorrow morning. He realized the plan was far from fool-proof. What if they didn't take the bait? But the story had said fifteen-thousand dollars. That was a fat fortune out here, where you rode your heart out for twenty a month, biscuits and bunk. With a hard, jaw-tightening soberness, he thought of laughing Johnny Strack. Lee remembered to pick up his carbine, to jam his brush jacket with shells, before he tramped stiffly to the corral. He'd already lost half a day's ride.

Topping the first long-running ridge, it struck him as odd that Big Sick hadn't been in today. Funny, how the old Osage got around. "Maybe," Lee chuckled to himself, "he's out fishing."

Night's hazy, blue-black shadow had begun to dissolve and a cooling wind brushed down the last line of the hills as Lee caught sight of Yellow Hand. It was a one-street town on the flat back of the browning prairie. He had eaten a cold supper at a relay stage station, rolled in his blankets and, in a few hours, had struck out north. He had made it just in time, too, he realized. Already, Hank Bristow, Johnny Strack's relief, was hustling up four horses from the back corral of the livery barn. Lee rode over where Bristow was hitching up.

"You've got another passenger," Lee said.

"I like company," Bristow said dryly. He was short and thick and square-shouldered. "Anybody with a gun."

Lee grinned. "I can push if you get stuck." He stabled the exhausted gelding, pulled off saddle, blanket and bridle, and rubbed him down with some hay. Then, climbing aboard the stage, he threw the sweaty gear in the top rack. He slid the carbine between them. When Bristow trotted the coach to the express office, the fat agent came out of the office. He tossed up a black metal box. Bristow caught it deftly, let it clang down at his feet.

"Look sharp," the agent said with an old man's plain worry.

"Reckon I know," Bristow laughed flatly. "We got passengers, too." He was staring across at the hotel, still waiting. There was a steady tapping noise and Lee swung around.

ENORMOUS in his draped blanket, Charlie Big Sick was shuffling across the planked porch. His feathered hat jerked as he took the steps. Lee saw a half-grin on the copper-hued face.

"You—here?" Lee asked, amazed. "How come?"

"Fishing." Big Sick rolled his muddy eyes at the sky and the string of fish hooks rattled faintly on his hat. "Sign about right. Looking better all time." As Big Sick clambered inside, grunting, the stagecoach sagged on its leather braces.

Lee snorted as Bristow said, "One more." Angrily, Lee looked around. Kate Trinkle was hurrying down the porch steps. Her eyes were bright with a held-in excitement as she came up.

"You, too?" Lee glowered down at her.

"Charlie told me," she said defiantly. "You can't stop me. I bought a ticket."

"There'll be trouble," he warned her.

"Get back to the hotel. You tell her. Hank."

Head high, Kate went to the stage step, climbed in. Hank Bristow shrugged pained, disgusted. "Women!" he growled. He swore at the leaders. They lunged and the stage rolled from Yellow Hand in a churning, kicked-up dust. Back stiff against the seat, Lee was thinking ahead bleakly, to the timber crowding the rutted road where it scarred the great-humped hills. Those were places where Bristow would have to slow down, with a man sticking out on the high seat like a shooting gallery duck.

When the passengers got out to stretch at the noon relay stop, Kate kept her back turned to Lee while he helped Bristow change the horses. Soon they were rumbling across rolling prairie. In the distance, Lee could see the beginning of the black, ragged timber on the slopes, and he felt a growing dread. Before long the grade steepened, abruptly.

Bristow laid a troubled glance on the thickening timber.

Lee shifted his carbine. "Hit 'em a lick," he yelled.

Bristow's whoop rang with the whip and the four horses plunged up the wooded hill. They racketed up its stony footing and crossed a clearing. Lee breathed easier. Maybe he had guessed wrong, better if he had with Kate and the old Indian along. Here the land buckled and tossed, the road bending, looping. All at once, Bristow raised his voice, "Get down!"

Lee felt a stunning jar. There was a loud crack as the wheels struck again, bounced high and fell with a lurching jolt that shook Lee violently. He had to let go the carbine to hang on. Bristow was cursing in his ear, sawing furiously on the long reins. Over his shoulder, Lee saw the cut logs strung across the road behind them and, twisting around, the piled timber short ahead blocking the stagecoach. At the edge of the blackjacks three riders waited, shotguns slanted. Too late, Lee saw his carbine rolling loosely around his feet. Now Bristow had stopped the stage.

The horsemen moved in close. "Get out," a man called. He was broad in the saddle, with blunt hands. He jogged his greener at Bristow and Lee. "Get 'em up—high," he growled. The others spread out. They wore long brush jackets, flop-brimmed hats, red bandanas across their faces.

Sick all through, Lee saw Kate and Big Sick step out stiffly. Kate's face looked white, scared, but still stubborn. She gave Lee the sharp edge of her condemning eyes.

"Throw that box down," the heavy man called up to Bristow.

He hesitated, looking up. Lee, remembering Johnny Strack, grunted helplessly, "Go ahead, Hank. I'll get it back."

With a dogged reluctance, Bristow nudged the strongbox out with the toe of his boot. It dropped close to the front wheel, bounced back under the braces. The big rider cursed nervously.

"You," he ordered, jabbing the shotgun at Big Sick, "get under there and drag it out!"

Deliberately, the old medicine man stiffened, glaring, "White man go to hell," he grunted. "Indian money."

"You mean was," the rider jeered.

"Go—cut out the talk," the middle horseman broke in with authority, voice muffled behind the mask.

HIS partner swung down. Holding the reins, he clumped to the stage. When he straightened up with the box and shotgun cradled in his arms, he was very close to Big Sick, contemptuously close. Silent, stone-faced, Big Sick stood with his hands brushing his hat. Now Lee caught a glimmer in the muddy eyes, the sudden decision tightening the thick mouth. Lee knew then that he had to say something, anything.

"Hold on!" he hollered. "You—"

The big man was turning to his horse as Lee yelled. Lee saw the two riders jerk his way. But Big Sick's hand had flicked out. In a motion astonishingly fast for so huge a man, he skinned off

the fish hooks, tagged them on the tail of the gunman's brush jacket as he stepped away, eyes on Lee.

The outlaw hit the saddle and suddenly screamed in pain. Box and shotgun flew out and the horse spooked, bucking wildly. The rider lost his one good stirrup, grabbed for leather, missed. He bounced off in a rolling tangle, the bandana sliding down. Lee saw Duff Shaner's pain-twisted face. Then the boss man was swinging on Big Sick and Lee saw his chance.

LEE ducked low, digging for the carbine. He swung it up, squeezed the trigger, heard the slug thud. There was a booming roar in his ears. The rider was swaying. His arms slacked and the gun spilled down.

"Duff—Tip!" A voice shouted—Tracy Bullard's stricken, pleading voice.

But Tip Wall was spurring away, and Duff Shaner was wobbling up, a pistol in his hand. Lee's bullet hit him in the chest. He pitched forward, knees buckling.

He didn't get up.

All Lee could hear was the fading beat of Tip Wall's horse on the stony slope. "He won't be back," Hank Bristow said.

When Lee looked down, Kate was staring up at him.

Her face was still white, but there was something there that he hadn't noticed before.

"Next time," Lee said to her in a half-swallowed voice, "you won't be so stubborn."

"Maybe," she said stubbornly, "you'll just have to get used to it."

Ponderously, Big Sick was shuffling past Tracy Bullard's recumbent form, over to Duff Shaner. With a grin, he picked up the strongbox. Then he stooped, his hand jerking.

When he stood up, he was dangling a string of fish hooks.

"Me catch 'em," he grunted, pleased and proud, and Lee knew that Antelope Springs would be telling this story for many years to come. "Two fish—plenty big." • • •

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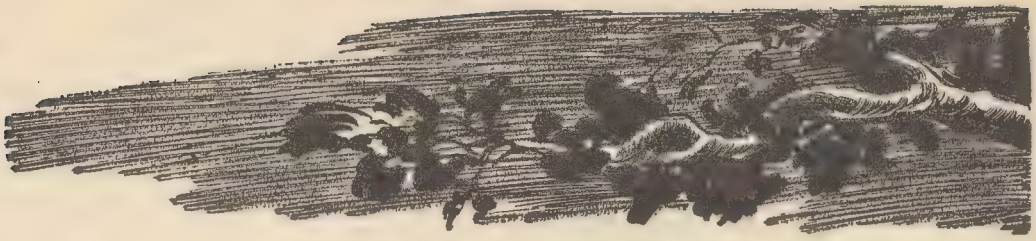

I RIDE ALONE

A Novelet by

H. A. DE ROSSO

Despite himself, Swanee hired out as a killer—and found that his own conscience and the tenderness of a woman were harder to face than the business end of a deadly derringer

CHAPTER I

A Rep Is Built

I KILLED MY FIRST MAN when I was twenty-two years old. That was three years ago during the San Martin cattle war. Since then I've killed three others. I suppose this makes me sound like a killer and maybe I am. Anyway, that's how everyone had me tallied.

It's a hell of a life to live when everybody's got you figured for something you yourself don't think you are. After a while, you got to feeling that maybe you're wrong and everybody else is right. That's just how I was beginning to feel when I went to work for Jules Desbros.

I never wanted to be a gunhand. Back in San Martin County I was just a cowpuncher for the Hat outfit. They got mixed up in a cattle war and both sides brought in hired gunmen, but I never drew gun wages. But people never look at it that way. They just remember that the first man I killed was Len Beaudry.

Beaudry was a big-mouth, forever blowing off about the eleven men he claimed he had killed and how good he was with an iron and how everyone had better walk with lowered necks around him. He was feeling a little high the day he picked on me. I had no quarrel with him but I worked for the Hat and he had been hired by the Running W. Maybe, too, he had me figured for a pushover and an easy number twelve on the list of men he could brag about having killed.

Sure, I was packing an iron but everybody did in those days. A man would as

"You better make it good, Swanee," he said

soon go around naked as without a six-shooter. And just because a man wore a gun didn't mean he was spoiling to kill someone. My .44 had been pretty useful to me. I'd used the butt of it as a hammer to repair fences and to shoe a horse. I'd killed a couple of coyotes with it, and some jack-rabbits, and I'd picked tin cans off fence posts with it, but I had never aimed to use it on a fellowman.

Well, Beaudry asked for it and he got it and that was how it started with me. Before the war was over I'd had to kill another hired gunman who figured to add to his prestige by killing me because I'd killed Len Beaudry. It was like that with the other two. They tangled with me because I had a rep and they would have a bigger rep if they killed me. Sure, I didn't have to kill them. I could have let them kill me, but I want to live as much as anybody.

MAYBE if the Hat had won the San Martin cattle war things might have been different for me, but I still would have had the rep as a fast gunman. As it was, the Hat lost out and I had to light out for other ranges. It's funny how a man's rep travels ahead of him so fast.

I found people splitting into two kinds —those that would hire me and those that wouldn't. The ones that wouldn't were the ones I wanted to work for. But they'd take a look at my iron and remember that I was Swanee, the gunfighter, and they'd shake their heads and say they were sorry but they just didn't have anything open right then.

The others that would hire me expected me to use my iron. Oh, they wouldn't come out and tell me that baldly, but I always saw that I would find myself in a situation where that was what I would have to do. So I'd just ride on to another range, hoping to find things different there, but they were the same all over.

After three years of it, I felt there was no use fighting it any more. Fate or something had played me a dirty trick and I would just have to go along with it. I wasn't rotten inside. I wasn't a killer. I just wanted to be a cowpuncher making thirty a month and dreaming that some day I might have a spread of my own. But I knew that wasn't in the cards for me any more. I was Swanee. I was fast with a gun. I was a killer.

That's how I was feeling about everything when Peso Flowers came to arrange the meeting between me and Jules Desbros. I was in some tank town close to the Border, with a room in a Mex *cantina.* Flowers came at night, when no one would see him, and he left in the same secret way. He told me to take a train in a couple of days and he'd meet me on it and then we'd carry on from there. He gave me fifty dollars and left.

The train I took was a night train. I sat in a coach and waited. A couple of stops later Peso Flowers got on the train and he passed through my coach and I saw him give me a quick, secret glance, but that was all. He passed me by as if he'd never seen me before, but that was the way he'd planned it.

He came back a little after midnight when the lights had been dimmed on the train and everybody was dozing and snoring in their seats. Flowers came into the coach and beckoned with his head. I got up from my seat and followed him.

Jules Desbros was sitting in an end seat in the smoking car. He was a man of about forty. His eyes were black and direct and sharp. He wore a close-cropped mustache and a neat goatee that was sprinkled with gray. He had on a gray pin-stripe suit that would have set a puncher back three or four months wages. He was awfully clean and neat, with his nails clipped short and the smell of cologne water about him, but he didn't look soft. Those cold eyes told me that and the brief glimpse I got of the pearl handle of a gun under his left arm.

Flowers motioned me to a seat opposite Desbros, then sat down himself. Desbros watched me a while. I could feel him weighing me, trying to figure me out, considering how far he could go with me.

It made me a little angry. I didn't like being stared at and considered the way a man considers a horse to decide how much work he can get out of him. I know I didn't look too good. I'd cleaned up before getting on the train, but I'd been riding for over six hours and the soot and dirt had got on me again. My levis were faded and worn. My boots were scuffed at the toes. But I did have on a new blue shirt I'd bought the day before. But compared to Desbros, I guess I looked like a dirty bar rag.

Finally Desbros hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his vest and said, "How much do you ask for killin' a man?"

THROWN at me like that, it left me stunned. I had suspected something like this all along. I had known what it was going to be when I decided to meet Desbros. But I had expected a bit of dallying around, a hint here and there, and maybe no actual mention of the fact. Having it come direct and cold and impersonal

like that, left me unable to talk.

Impatience flared in Desbros' eyes. "Didn't you hear me?" he snapped.

The shock was beginning to pass in me. "Who said I had any price for a thing like that?" I said cautiously.

Desbros waved an irritated hand. "Let's not beat around the bush. Let's come to the point as quickly as we can. This thing requires the utmost secrecy. I don't want any one seeing us together, so let's not haggle. You're Swanee, aren't you? Well, what are you asking?"

Just like that, I thought bitterly. I'm Swanee, so I'm a cold-blooded killer with a fixed price. Just name the hombre, pay me my cash, and the job is done. Just like that.

I glanced at Peso Flowers. He sat there watching me with a mocking amusement in his pale gray eyes. He was a slight man with a huge hooked nose and a thin, cruel mouth. He wore his iron tied-down low on his right thigh like the gunman he was. Looking at him, I could see myself in a few more years, a cold, ruthless, conscienceless stink on the earth, and the thought of that gagged me.

"Well?" said Desbros, sounding impatient and a little angry. "What is it? How much? Will five hundred do it?"

I was hating every second of it. I felt like getting up from my seat and walking out on the lurching platform of the coach and puking into the night. But this was the trail that was cut out for me. No matter how much I hated it, fate or something had said that this was the trail for me to ride and there was nothing I could do about it.

I nodded.

"Good!" Desbros said, taking his thumbs out of his vest pockets. He leaned forward toward me, rocking easily to the sway of the coach like he was used to riding this way a lot, and he pitched his voice low. "You'll be paid half of that now and the other half when you've delivered. Now listen close. I don't want to have to go over this with you more than once.

"You'll get off this train at the next stop. You'll get a horse and ride north, and you'll drift into Fort Lester in about three days. There's no rush on the job. You'll have approximately three weeks to do it. I don't want a bungling, unimaginative piece of work. I want nothing crude, understand?

"You'll have time to hang around Fort Lester and get acquainted. You'll see me and Flowers there but you don't know us, understand? You'll never give any hint that you ever knew us. After your job is done you'll ride off and the balance payment will reach you. Don't worry about that. But you don't know me or Flowers under any circumstances, understand?"

His eyes were cold and hard, no feeling in them at all. He might as well have been auctioning off some beef cattle or discussing the tariff instead of ordering the death of a man.

"The man's name is Ben Fairway," he went on. "He's an attorney. He has a case coming up in court against me in a little over three weeks and I don't want him alive to appear in court. Understand?"

CHAPTER II

Enter the Lady

DESBROS settled back in his seat and put his thumbs in his vest pockets again. He kept looking at me out of those dark eyes with the cold, unwinking stare of a dead fish.

I gave a look at Flowers. He still watched me like he was amused by what he saw. I felt a sudden start of anger. The whole thing was so distasteful, I wanted so much not to be a part of it, that I had to force myself not to spit in their faces.

Instead I said, "Couldn't you give me some reason why Fairway should be killed? After all, I like to kid myself that I'm doin' somethin' good. What is it this time?"

Desbros was counting out some money

from a thick roll. He tossed the bills in my lap. Without looking at them, I shoved them into my pocket. Desbros speared me with that glance of his.

"He gets in my way," he said coldly. "He's organized opposition to the Southwest Development Company which happens to be me. He's bringing suit in court against Southwest Development. He can't be bought off or scared off. So there's no other alternative. Any more questions?"

I rose to my feet and stood in the lurching aisle of the coach. "Just one more. Why did you pick me?"

Desbros permitted himself a little smile. "I've got you figured as a man with brains. Too many of your kind have nothing but rocks in their heads. This is a job that will stand no bungling. I don't want to be tied in in any way with Fairway's death. You've never been to Fort Lester. You've never had occasion to meet me. You drift to Fort Lester and hang around a while and finally you have an altercation with Fairway and then you ride off. You'll have to use your head some if you're going to pull this off right."

I glanced at Flowers. "Is that why you didn't give the job to Flowers here? Ain't he bright enough?"

The sneer went out of Flowers' eyes fast. He leaned forward abruptly, hand reaching for his iron in the only answer a man of his kind has to anything.

He snarled, "For a Mex peso, I'd—"

Desbros held up a hand, halting Flowers. "Quiet, Peso," he murmured, and Flowers instantly subsided. "There was no call for that, Swanee," Desbros said to me, his stare icier than ever. "It's time you ran along, but first I want to tell you one more thing. You can cross me, Swanee, you can bungle the job, but remember this. I always pay my debts. All of them. Understand?"

Fort Lester lay in the middle of a long valley. A dirty, yellow river ran its crooked course along one side of the town. Back in the distance reared the red and gray palisades and above them, half-hidden in blue and purple mists, was a massive, snow-covered mountain peak.

I rode across the wooden bridge that spanned the river and turned the bay down the main drag of Fort Lester. It didn't look like too much of a town at first sight. It was the business center for the valley, but it looked only fairly prosperous.

I rode the bay at a walk, looking over the buildings that lined the main drag. They were mostly false fronts but an occasional two-story structure was among them. The usual assortment was included, running all the way from the general stores to the saloons.

I first noticed the woman when she was about a hundred feet away. She was riding a palomino, coming toward me, and at first I thought the rider was a boy. As she came closer, I made out the long black sheen of her hair fanning down over her shoulders. She was dressed like a man, with a cream-colored Stetson set at an almost cocky angle on the glossy black hair, and a black-and-red-checkered flannel shirt, and blue jeans tucked into the tops of her small Cheyenne boots.

But it was her face that really struck me. Maybe she wasn't too beautiful, for her mouth was wide and her nose was a trifle too thin but her cheek-bones were high and prominent so as to give a squint to her eyes. All this had been browned by the sun and wind until it was the color of rich brown leather and it was this darkness of her skin that made her clear gray eyes stand out in such a startling way.

SHE rode past me, giving me only the slightest notice, almost as if she had not seen me at all. Just enough of an impersonal, passing glance to tell her I was a stranger and unknown to her. Then she was past me and I wanted to turn around in the saddle and give her another look, but I told myself that wasn't for me.

The only women for me wore paint on their lips and cheeks and had loud, harsh voices and were to be had with the same money that bought a man's death. I was Swanee who earned his living with his iron. I could never have a good woman.

I took a room at the hotel and during

the next three days I loafed about Fort Lester, mostly in the saloons. There I heard enough talk to give me a pretty good picture of what was going on, and what Jules Desbros and his Southwest Development Company wanted.

Desbros was out to control the valley. There were rumors that the Midland Pacific Railroad was going to build through the valley, and the talk was that there was mineral wealth up in the highlands above the palisades and even in the valley itself. Desbros was collecting the valley piece by piece. Those who didn't sell willingly were pushed around and threatened and bullied until they gave in.

Desbros' man was sheriff and the county commissioners were his men and so was the county judge and prosecutor. The only man he couldn't approach was the circuit judge and he had Desbros worried.

It seemed that a young lawyer named Ben Fairway had found certain irregularities in some of Desbros' real estate deals and he was suing Southwest Development in circuit court. The talk said that Fairway had a pretty good chance of breaking Southwest Development wide open. Fairway, the saloon gossip had it, was a fighter. Other attorneys had been bought off or frightened off. But Fairway wasn't that kind.

I saw Desbros and Peso Flowers around, but they never gave me a tumble and as for me I didn't know them from a Hereford heifer. But everybody knew me. That got around in the quick, silent way like it always did. I was Swanee. I walked in a little, cold world of my own. I was anathema.

I kept seeing the gray-eyed woman. She came to town often and when she was riding past on her palomino it was only her in my eyes, nothing else, no remembrance of anything, of who I was or what I was here for, nothing but the sight of her and the aching knowledge that a woman like her could never be mine.

She lived on a ranch up the valley, I learned, and her name was Glennis Lannon. It was said that she was Ben Fairway's girl. She wore no ring or any other token of being spoken for but she never went around with any other man but Fairway.

I tried not thinking about her, but it seemed that the harder I tried the more she came to my mind. It got so that I couldn't do anything, couldn't take a drink, couldn't eat a meal, couldn't take a ride up or down the valley without her face haunting me.

I figured it wasn't just her. She symbolized what was going on in my mind, the rebellion against the thing I was hired to do, the distaste in me, the loathing. I finally decided that the best thing for me to do was to get the whole thing over with as quick as I could. So I went to see Ben Fairway.

He had his office on the floor above the bank. It seemed like an ugly dream as I mounted those stairs, each mournful squeak of them sounding like a funeral dirge. Even the tinkling of my spurs seemed a harsh, jarring sound.

He was surprised to see me, even though he must have been expecting it. His face went taut and for a moment there was a bare, resigned look in his eyes and then he caught himself and was looking up at me and saying quietly, "Yes?"

"I hear you handle real estate," I said. "I've been thinkin' about settlin' down in the valley. Do you have anything that ain't too big or don't carry too high a price?"

I could see him considering me. He took his time and chose every word carefully. "I have nothing like that right now."

"Why?"

He was taken back by that. He kind of stiffened in his chair and his eyes wavered a little. "I don't get what you mean," he said.

HE WAS a nice-looking fellow of about thirty, the kind of man whose acquaintance and friendship I would have liked to have if I hadn't been a hired killer. His face wasn't too brown from the sun and his cheeks and chin were blue

where he had shaved. His hair was black and curly and his eyes were brown and honest. It kind of twisted my heart to think that a man like Fairway had to die while other men of the stripe of Desbros and Flowers had to pollute the face of the earth.

But I had my job to do.

"You know who I am, don't you?" I said in a cold, angry tone. "Even if you had a hundred places to sell you still wouldn't sell one to me. Ain't that right?"

He colored a little and this time his eyes dropped and his stare stayed down on his desk. "Yes, I know who you are, Swanee. But that doesn't have anything to do with it. There really isn't anything I handle that is for sale. If it was, Southwest Development would have bought it up. They're buying up every piece of land in the valley, even those that aren't for sale. My clients are fighting to hang on to what they own. Why don't you go to see Southwest Development? They might have something for you."

"Like you said, Southwest Development is buyin' and not sellin'," I told him. "As for you, you don't want to sell to me because my name is Swanee. Ain't that right?"

His face paled. He lifted his eyes and they were no longer scared or tired. They so much as told me that he was through being pushed around.

"Are you trying to pick a fight with me, Swanee?" he asked quietly. "I'm not packing a gun, you know."

I tried hard not to let it get me but still it was like a hand clawing and twisting my guts. I hadn't thought of it exactly like that, but that was how it was. Start an argument, goad him until he reached for his iron, then pull mine and earn my five hundred. That was the ugly thought running through my mind now. If I was a killer, that was how it had to be. If I was to earn my living with my iron, that was how it had to be done.

Yet I couldn't help feeling relieved that he wasn't packing an iron.

"I'm not tryin' to pick any fight," I said angrily. "I'm just sick and tired of bein' pushed around, of bein' ignored, of being unwanted everywhere I go just because my name is Swanee. I'm goin' to give you a chance, Fairway. I mean to settle down in this valley and I want you to find a place for me. I'll give you three days to think it over. Then I'm comin' back here and you better have an excuse other than that my name is Swanee for not sellin' anything to me. Do you get me, Fairway?"

"He gets you," a girl's voice behind me said coldly. "We all get you. Now you better get out of here, Swanee!"

I whirled, grabbing for my iron, but the gun was pointing at my belly, and so I took my hand slowly and carefully empty away. The shock of it was enough to choke the breath in my chest and when the pain of holding it was great enough I let it out in an aching sigh.

CHAPTER III

Strange Proposal

GLENNIS LANNON stood there with a grim, scornful twist to her mouth, the .41 in her hand rock-steady as she held it in a line with my belt buckle. Those gray eyes were almost reptilian in the cold, unwinking way they stared at me.

"I'm sorry you put off finishing it for three days, Swanee," Glennis Lannon said, each word wrenching my heart. "It would have given me the greatest pleasure to put a slug in you the minute you pulled your iron."

I couldn't think any more with her standing there like that, the hate and revulsion so plain on her face. I felt so low I could have crawled out of there on my belly. If only it had been someone else, anyone else. Not her. She was the last one I had wanted to see me at a time like this, when I was going about my dirty, stinking business.

I started for the door and she stepped

aside to let me pass. The gun was still in her hand and she followed my progress with it. I guess it was the hurt and pride all mixed in together that made me stop just over the threshold and say over my shoulder:

"Remember, Fairway. Three days."

There was nothing to do now but wait and remember. Nothing to do but lie on my bed up in my room, smoking one cigarette after another, watching the smoke lifting lazily toward the ceiling, and seeing in that smoke her face, hating me and looking at me like I was the lowest, filthiest, rottenest crawling thing on earth.

I tried drinking. I took a bottle of Bourbon up to my room and I drank until I was sick to my stomach, but her face still haunted me. The next morning, through all the aching, pounding daze of the hangover, the agony of remembrance was twice as bad.

I thought maybe it was the four walls of the room, the forlorn emptiness of it, and maybe if I got outside then it would be easier on me. So I took to riding aimlessly up and down the valley. I rode to where the crimson palisades reared and I found a trail that led to the top and I wandered around up there, but it didn't help much.

I was sick in my heart with loneliness. I got to thinking that it wasn't so much her. I was tired of being so alone, of not having any one to care for me. I was tired of having to associate with men like Jules Desbros and Peso Flowers. I was tired of being Swanee, the killer.

This day I rode down from the palisades along toward evening and started across the valley toward Fort Lester. That was when I spotted the palomino quartering across the land to intercept me. I reined in my bay and waited.

I could see as she came up that she was doing it in a deliberate, thoughtful way. I could see her still considering it as she came in close. She reined in the palomino about five feet away. She folded her hands over the horn of her saddle and leaned forward slightly and looked at me in a way that indicated she was still going over the thing in her mind.

Her face was impersonal. There was no hate or dislike on it, but it wasn't friendly either. She looked calm and cool and serious.

She was silent a while. Finally she said, "Maybe this won't do much good, Swanee, but I'm trying anyhow. Somehow I've got the feeling that you can be talked to. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you're no better than the rest. But somehow I feel you're not like Peso Flowers, for instance. So I'm going to try to talk to you."

She paused and drew a deep breath. I said nothing. I waited for her to go on.

Finally she said, "I know there is no way I can prove it but I know, everyone in the valley knows you've been hired by Jules Desbros to kill Ben Fairway. Like I say, there's no proof, Swanee. Desbros is clever that way and you're clever, too. You'll egg Ben into a fight and kill him and ride away. Somehow you'll get your pay from Desbros but he'll be careful that no one sees how, the same way he was careful no one saw him hire you. I've watched you ignore him on the street, Swanee, and him ignore you. You have yet to exchange a word with him. Oh, it's so fiendishly clever and smart, Swanee."

SHE couldn't keep the scorn out of her voice any more. I just sat there, listening dully, shriveling up inside, my guts knotting up. It seemed twice as ugly coming from her, the picture was twice as dirty hearing her describe it.

"So you see, Swanee," she was going on, "I know how it is. I'm telling you this in the hope that somewhere in you there is some spark of decency left. If you're not rotten all the way through like Flowers, you'll act like a man and walk out on it. Will you, Swanee?"

I tried to hide the hurt in me with a faint smile. "I'm afraid I don't get you," I said.

She made an impatient gesture. "I know you won't admit to anything I've said. I don't expect you to. But we understand each other. Will you do it, Swanee? Will you be a man and let Ben go?"

"You've got it all wrong," I said. "Sure, I don't talk to Desbros, but why should I when I don't know the man? As for Fairway, you're way off there, Miss Lannon. In fact, it's talk like you've just made here that gets my hackles up." My voice rose a little. "Have you ever stopped to look at it my way, Miss Lannon? I happen to ride here to Fort Lester and I hang around because I like the place. There's some trouble goin' on between Desbros and Fairway. With no proof at all, mind you, with nothin' to go on, everyone puts me in Desbros' employ. Everyone says I'm here to kill Fairway.

"What do you actually have to base all these accusations on, Miss Lannon? Just one thing. The fact that my name is Swanee. Because that's my name I've got to take all kinds of abuse, I've got to stand for dirty, malicious gossip behind my back, I've got to be an outcast. Sure, I was mad at Fairway the other day. I felt like givin' him a good workin' over and I might have, too, if you hadn't shown up. And I'll still give him a workin' over if he can't satisfy me when I'll call on him tomorrow. I'm tired of all the rotten talk, all the false accusations against me. Have you ever looked at it that way, Miss Lannon?"

I could see the doubt come to her face. Her glance wavered and fell. Then, defiantly, she lifted those startling gray eyes up to me again.

"Maybe I am wrong," she said earnestly, "and if I am then I apologize, Swanee. I guess there's a lot of truth in what you've said. But if your life is loathsome to you, why don't you change it? Why don't you do something else to earn your living?"

Just like that, I thought bitterly. She was like all the rest. To her it was simple. All I had to do was take up something else. She was forgetting my name was Swanee. She was forgetting that everyone felt about me the same way she did.

Would she give me a job on that ranch of hers? Would anyone in this valley who didn't need a hired gunhand give me a job? I was going to ask her that but I felt I might as well save my breath.

Instead I said, "You must be awful fond of Fairway to worry about him like this."

"I am," she said frankly. "I love him."

"So?" I said softly. "Do you mean that?"

I saw that it puzzled her, but there was also something in her tone that made me not so sure she loved Fairway, like she said. She knitted her brows and canted her head a little to one side as she stared at me.

"What are you driving at, Swanee?" she asked.

I wasn't quite sure when the idea had first occurred to me. Maybe it had been in me a long time, maybe from the first moment I laid eyes on Glennis Lannon, but I hadn't been conscious of it until now. Its boldness left me a little cold. My heart pounded dully inside me. I kept telling myself I was a fool to go on with it but I'd been so miserable and lonely these last few days, I was ready to gamble on anything.

I DIDN'T let any of what I felt inside show in my voice. I said, "I'm curious to know how much Fairway really means to you. Will you tell me honestly, Miss Lannon?"

She began to be irritated. "Stop riding a muddy creek, Swanee," she said impatiently.

"All right," I said. "I'll draw you a picture. You've got reason to believe Desbros wants Fairway killed. What if I were to use my iron to protect Fairway from Desbros and Flowers, and whoever else they care to throw against him? What would you say to that, Miss Lannon?"

She drew in her breath sharply. "You don't mean it, Swanee!"

My mouth was a tight, bitter line. "That's how you've got me pegged, ain't it?" I asked. "I earn my livin' with my iron, don't I? Well, do you want me to side Fairway?"

She shook her head slightly as if she couldn't believe it. I saw that she was confused and uncertain. "You wouldn't

be doing it for nothing," she said. "Your kind never does anything for nothing. What price are you asking, Swanee?"

"You!"

That pulled a sharp gasp out of her. She stiffened in the saddle. I saw her hands close tightly around the saddle-horn, so tightly that her knuckles showed white.

There was a gnawing ache in my heart. I would have given anything to have been able to tell her the way I really felt inside. But this was cold, brutal business, there was no room for affection or sentiment here.

"I won't make any pretty speeches," I told her. "I'll just say I want to marry you. I'll also say that it's the real thing with me, but I'm not askin' you to believe it or even consider it. I'm puttin' it to you bluntly. It all depends on how much you love Fairway. If Desbros is out to get him, you know Fairway hasn't a chance. He can't stand up to Flowers or anybody else Desbros throws at him. But I can, Glennis. I've made it my business to learn how to handle an iron and I'm not afraid to stand up to any one. That's how it is.

"It really depends on two things—how much you love Fairway and how good you think I am with an iron. I'm not askin' for your answer now. I'll give you two days to think it over. At the end of that time, I'll ride out here and if you agree, you can meet me here. If you don't show up, then I'll know you're willin' to let Fairway face it alone. I won't try to force you one way or another. The choice is all yours to make."

CHAPTER IV

Blood Bargain

I GUESS Glennis did love Fairway. I thought I could see that in her face when she came to me two days later. She was dry-eyed, but I could tell that she had cried. There were no tears in her now, though, only a cold, bitter defiance and the determined will to go through with it.

She reined in the palomino and her first words to me were, "I'm telling it to you only this once, Swanee. If this is a trick, if you don't live up to your part of the bargain, I'll kill you, Swanee. So help me God, I'll kill you!"

I didn't know if I should be glad or sorry. It was a cheap trick to play on her, but I wanted her and what she represented so much that I'd have done anything to get her. But still I couldn't help feeling a little sorry about it and much ashamed.

I couldn't think of much to say. "Well, where do we go from here?" I asked.

She hung her head and there was a small catch in her voice. "I'll marry you right away, Swanee, but not in Fort Lester. I won't ever ask another favor of you, but please not in Fort Lester. There's a little Mexican settlement up in the mountains and we can get married there. We can stay there a couple of days, then return, but I couldn't go to Fort Lester right away."

I felt lower than ever hearing her talk like that with the hurt so plain in her voice. All I could do was mumble, "All right. We'll do it any way you want to, Glennis."

I know I shouldn't have expected too much but still I had hoped it would turn out better than it did. I had no kick coming really. Glennis was nice about it, though I had hoped it would go a little beyond a reserved politeness with her. Yet I couldn't blame her.

She didn't show a smile those two days we spent in San Felipe. In fact, I had yet to see her smile and it was something sad and depressing to me to see her face always grave, and wanting to hear her laugh. I wanted so much to bring some joy to her yet I knew achingly that I could never do that. The whole thing had been wrong; but now it was done and I would have to go along with it.

I finally had my good woman, but I was still Swanee. I was still the hired killer.

Even the fine woman I had, had come to me only on my promise to use my iron. Dully I realized I could never get away from the fact that I was a hired killer and nothing else.

We had been married by a *padre* in San Felipe and we were staying at the inn. The night before we were to return to Fort Lester I could see the strain coming over Glennis. I realized how awful it was going to be for her to return there as the wife of the man whom everyone believed had been hired to kill the man she had promised to marry.

I was going to suggest that we needn't return there, then I remembered coldly what my part of the bargain was. I couldn't protect Ben Fairway if I was some place other than Fort Lester. She knew that, too. That was why she would swallow her pride and shame and return there with me. We had made a bargain and there was no other choice for either one of us.

I couldn't stand the tenseness, the sitting around waiting for the time to pass, the business of watching the hurt come out clearer and clearer on Glennis' face. I knew there would be no sleep for me that night.

So I went out into the night of San Felipe. It was nothing more than a village. Its inhabitants were all descendants of the old Spaniards and the Indians. They tilled the barren land for what it would yield and grazed sheep on the sparseness of the mountain.

It was a quiet, sleepy town and at this hour of night all the lights were out. The glow of my cigarette was the only light that showed. I walked to the edge of the village where the trail began its steep descent down the side of the mountain. I stood there gazing off into the darkness I don't know how long.

THE cigarette burned down to ashes and I lit another one and that one burned down, too, and that was the only marking of the passage of time for me. I had too many things on my mind—there was Glennis, my wife, and Fairway and Desbros and Flowers, and far back in my mind the hellish, needling remembrance of Len Beaudry, the first man I had killed, and then it was Glennis again.

That was why it was I didn't hear them come up behind me. The first awareness I had was the sound of a stone turning under the foot of one of them and I whirled, but they were on me and before I could cry out the point of a knife was there held tight against my throat.

It was Peso Flowers holding the knife. He had his lips pared back from his teeth in a ghastly grin. He was trembling ever so slightly and I knew coldly that it was from eagerness. He could hardly wait to shove that knife home. It was only the presence of Jules Desbros that held Flowers back.

Debros came up close, putting his face scant inches from mine, the scent of cologne water strong in my nose.

"You better make it good, Swanee," he said, and the savagery in his voice struck a chill on the back of my neck. "You better make me believe every word you're going to tell me because if you don't, Peso is shoving that knife home!"

I made a small movement back but Flowers just pressed harder on the knife. Just a little more pressure and he'd pierce the skin. My throat was rasping dry and ached so that I could hardly talk. The sweat began to run down into my eyes.

"Can't you see it?" I gasped, fighting for time, trying to get all my rattled senses together again. "Are you so dumb you can't see how it is, Desbros?"

The anger and brutality were still in his tone. "You're the one that has to do the explaining, Swanee. You're the one that has to convince me that you haven't sold me out. Explain the Lannon girl—if you can, Swanee."

Flowers kept throwing that white, deadly grin at me. I knew he was hoping I wouldn't have the right answer. All he wanted to hear was the right word from Desbros.

My face was drenched with sweat. I tried moving my head ever so slightly but the knife stayed right with me.

"You're not as bright as you claim to be then, Desbros," I said hoarsely. "I thought you wanted it done with imagination, I thought you wanted me to use my head. I thought you didn't want to be tied in with it in any way. Well, haven't I done all that? Don't I have the perfect set-up? I'm married to Fairway's girl. Ain't that a natural?

"He's sore because I took his girl from him. We have it out because of that. Southwest Development don't enter into it at all. That was just another argument Fairway had. This other business is strictly between me and him. I thought that was what you wanted, Desbros. All right then. Give Flowers the word. I suppose he could do better? Go ahead, Desbros. Tell Flowers. You don't want anybody with brains workin' for you. You just want dumbbells like Flowers. Go ahead. Tell him to kill me!"

I knew it was an awful chance to take with Flowers bearing down on the knife like that, but it was the only way to be really convincing. And I knew Flowers never did anything without the express permission of Desbros. A man like Flowers could never do anything on his own.

Desbros hesitated. I knew he was going over it in his mind. Even Flowers must have got it through his thick skull for he eased up on the knife a little.

Finally Desbros said, "All right, Swanee. But you better be right. For your own sake, you better be right. Understand?"

Once we were back in Fort Lester I could see how hard it was on Glennis. Even under the heavy coat of tan, her face paled and grew wan and haggard. Shadows came into her eyes and there was a listlessness about everything she did. But she never complained. She never uttered one word of reproach.

AS FOR me, it was not much better than before. My life was still lonely and miserable even if I had Glennis. All that I had succeeded in doing was making her lonely and miserable, too. For even her own father never came near her now. She had not told him or anybody else, of course, why she had married me. I don't know what she told Fairway but she must have made it good and convincing. I passed him a few times on the street and he always walked by without so much as a hint that he had noticed me. He didn't look like he was going to make trouble over it, though, like I had been afraid he would.

Glennis didn't spend much time in Fort Lester. I didn't blame her. She couldn't stand the cold disapproval she met on all sides so she took to riding a lot in the valley. She never once mentioned going home—her father was her only relative—and I was sorry about that but I guess she had little choice.

We still weren't very good company for each other. At first, I hoped that with time this invisible barrier between us would vanish, but lately I began to suspect that it would never go. The whole thing had been wrong. I had thought that with time everything would work out all right, but there was just too much to overcome.

I began to worry now about Desbros and Flowers. The time was approaching for the circuit court session. I had stalled them off this long, but time was running out and I realized grimly that they would stand for no more excuses.

So I felt a little start of apprehension that day in the valley when I saw them come riding down on me. I was out riding alone. I had left Glennis in the hotel and I had taken a turn up to the palisades and now I was on my way back.

There was nothing secret about the way they rode toward me, and that alone was enough to alarm me. They were through conniving. Now it was all out in the open. Apparently the time for delivering the herd had come and I was caught without the cows.

I couldn't help tightening up inside as I watched them come up. There was a grimness about them that chilled me. Desbros had his hat pulled down low over his eyes and his coat kept flapping back to reveal the pearl handle of the iron

under his left arm. Flowers' glance was brightly mocking.

They reined in their horses one on either side of me. They didn't say anything at first, just sat there staring coldly at me.

Finally Desbros said, "It's all set for you, Swanee. Fairway has a place about a mile from here down by the river. You'll find him there with your wife."

I said nothing. My mind could hold nothing but the thought that the long dreaded moment had come. This was what I had been hired for. This is what I had been partly paid for. No matter how much I protested against it in my mind, this was what I had willingly hired myself out for.

Desbros' lips curved in a small sneer. "What's the matter? Don't you understand? Here's your chance to take Fairway. Well, aren't you going to?"

I licked dry lips. "Ain't you takin' a chance talkin' to me in the open like this, Desbros?"

He gave a short laugh. "You're forgetting that Southwest Development has nothing to do with your quarrel with Fairway. After all, you're the deceived husband, Swanee. I have nothing to do with it. I'm just telling you where you can find your wife. I think you had better go there."

"Yeah, Swanee," Peso muttered, "you'd better go!"

CHAPTER V

Debt Paid

PESO was there on the other side of me. I turned my head sharply toward him. While I had been talking to Desbros, Flowers had taken out his iron. He wasn't pointing it anywhere in particular. He just had the barrel resting on his saddle-horn, but it would take only a flick of the wrist to snap it against my ribs and blow a kidney right out of me.

Flowers was grinning in a mocking, leering way. "Ain't you just a little bit jealous, Swanee, with your wife carryin' on like that with her old flame? You should be awful mad, Swanee. If I was you, I'd rush right on down there and kill the dirty son."

"Yes, Swanee," said Desbros in his cold, impersonal way, "that's just what you better do. Understand?"

Fairway and Glennis saw me coming and they came out of the house and waited for me. As I rode up to them I could see the fear on their faces. Fairway was wearing a gun and he abruptly took his coat off and dropped it on the ground as if that would help his draw any. He was an easy mark if I had ever seen one.

I was all mixed up inside. I hadn't wanted to believe Desbros and Flowers, and now that I saw it was true I kept trying to tell myself that it didn't matter to me. But the ache in my heart gave the lie to that.

I had known all along how it was going to be, yet I had wanted to ride down here for one last look of Glennis. I wouldn't have bothered to come except for wanting that last look at her. And now that I was seeing her all the old ache, all the hopelessness, the crazy foolishness of it hit me and I was sorry I had come.

I reined in my bay and stared at Glennis. I couldn't help asking myself if I wasn't Swanee, if I hadn't been a killer, if that would have made a difference with her. Maybe it would have, but I doubted it. She loved Fairway. She would always love him. She had married me only because she loved him so much.

She put herself in front of Fairway and lifted an appealing face to me. "I can explain, Swanee. It's all a mistake. Don't get it—"

I cut her short. "I made a deal with you," I told her bitterly. "I aim to keep my part of the bargain."

I turned the bay and headed him away from there.

"Swanee!" she cried from behind me. "Let me explain, Swanee. Don't go until I've explained!"

Then she stopped abruptly. She must have seen Desbros and Flowers the same time I did. They were silhouetted atop a rise, watching us, and the moment I spotted them I turned the bay toward them. They noticed that and remained where they were, waiting for me.

I told myself bitterly, "It's all your fault, Swanee. You've got no one else to blame. You asked for it and you got it, and now there's no use cryin' over it. You know what you are. Don't kid yourself about bein' anything different. You knew the minute you saw her she wasn't for you. None of her kind is for you. The cheap, tawdry rooms are for you, the painted, false smilin' faces are for you, the overwhelmin' grossness is for you. You're a killer, Swanee. You'll always be one. The cards were dealt that way to you. There's no use fightin' it any more, Swanee."

Desbros was patting his goatee with his left hand as he watched me ride up. His eyes looked cold and disinterested but I could see the anger in the tight, pale line of his lips. Flowers had that vicious, eager light in his eyes. He seemed hardly able to restrain himself, leaning forward in his saddle, his right thumb hooked in his shell belt just ahead of his holstered iron.

Desbros sighed. "I'm really sorry to see it end like this, Swanee. I had big plans for you. You were a rarity to me, a gunman with brains. Together we could have gone far. I don't like to waste a good man like you, and for that reason I'll give you one more chance. Ride back and finish Fairway and I'll forget about everything else. It's not often I make an offer like this. Will you do it, Swanee?"

DESPITE his quiet, almost pleading voice, he had his coat drawn back so that the pearl handle of his iron poked out free and clear under his left arm. With my left hand I unbuttoned my shirt pocket and took out the roll of bills I carried there. I threw the money on the ground in front of Desbros' horse.

"Here's the three hundred you advanced to me," I told him. "Is that answer enough for you, Desbros?"

His eyes bulged suddenly. The cords stood out in his neck. He jerked upright in his stirrups.

"You're damn' right that's answer enough!" he screamed. "Take the dirty son, Peso!"

Flowers was fast. He had to be to hold his job with Desbros, but I was a shade faster. I got my .44 out as quick as I could and I threw a shot at Flowers just as he was leveling his iron. The slug took him in the chest and he rose up violently in his stirrups, his mouth slacking open in a strangled cry, then he began to topple from the saddle.

I wasn't forgetting Desbros. I had started to swerve toward him when the slug got me in the breast. All I felt was a sudden, numbing blow, then I seemed to float through the air right over the cantle of the saddle and back over the bay's rump, and the ground was coming up at me.

I guess he took another shot at me as I was going down. I heard something whine past my head that must have been the second slug he threw at me. Then I hit the ground on my shoulders and the pain began and started spreading all over my chest. The ground and the sky rocked in my sight. The horses were squealing and kicking and raising dust all over the place.

Somehow I had hung on to my iron all this time. Through the dust raised by the wheeling, frightened horses, I saw Desbros spurring his pony at me. He had his teeth bared in a feral snarl and he was pumping slugs at me as fast as he could. He didn't seem to care whether the bullets hit me or missed me. What he wanted to do was ride me down and trample me to death under his horse.

Flat on my back like that, I threw up my arm and got a good sight on Desbros with my iron. I sent one slug at him and he reeled in the saddle. His iron wavered and I put another slug in him. His horse was almost on me but those bullets passing by the pony's head panicked him and he

swerved sharply to the side.

Desbros was leaning over in the saddle, holding himself in the seat only because he had his left hand clenched about the horn. Doubled over like that, he still brought his iron up for another try at me, and I put one more slug in him. This time he let out a shrill, retching cry and went headlong out of his saddle.

I really felt the pain now. The blood had soaked all the front of my shirt. I was dizzy and weak and the whole world was dancing and pinwheeling all around me, but I still managed to stagger to my feet.

My bay's reins had fouled in a mesquite bush and I went reeling toward him, the ground bouncing violently up and down with every step I took. Finally I reached him and soothed him enough so that he stopped snorting and prancing. I undid the reins from where they were tangled in the mesquite, then I went to get into the saddle but I couldn't make it.

I tried lifting my left foot to the stirrup but I couldn't get it that high. I went spinning back up against the bay. I tried lifting that foot again, and again I couldn't make it. I lost my balance and this time the bay wheeled and I went sprawling on my face.

I started to crawl to my feet again. I was sobbing from the pain in my chest and from the greater hurt inside. I was cursing the world and all the people in it. I was hurt and sick and mad and I wanted to get away from here as fast as I could, but I couldn't even get in the saddle.

I HAD made it up to my knees when I felt hands grab my shoulders. I thought of Desbros and Flowers and I made a grab for my iron but my holster was empty. Somewhere back there I'd lost my .44. Then the world stopped spinning long enough for me to look into Glennis' face there close to mine.

"Go away," I said, pushing at her. "Leave me alone. I've done my job. You paid me my price and I've killed my men and now it's over. You can go back to Fairway. Only let me get on my horse and get away from here."

The tears were running down her cheeks. She paid no heed to my feeble attempts to push her aside. She grabbed my arms and put her face right in front of mine.

"Oh, Swanee, Swanee!" she was sobbing. "Please try to understand, Swanee. Please let me tell you what I wanted to tell you back there. It was all a trick, Swanee! Someone brought me a note telling me that Ben had been shot and was dying and wanted to see me for a last time. I thought Desbros had got to Ben at last, so I came here. Can't you see, Swanee? Desbros sent that note! Desbros arranged it like this. Please try to see it right, Swanee."

I stopped trying to get away from her. I was suddenly weak and tired and I couldn't fight anything any more. I only realized that she was close to me and that she was crying.

"Let me take care of you, Swanee," she was saying. "You're hurt and you've got to be taken care of. I'm your wife, Swanee. I love you. I'm going to take care of you until you're well."

I couldn't believe my ears. Suddenly I forgot the pain and the weariness. I reached out and clutched her arms. "What did you just say?" I cried hoarsely.

Her eyes were still wet but she was smiling now. "I love you, Swanee, I love you, I love you," she was saying over and over. "It's only you for me, Swanee. I know now I never did love Ben—not really. But he loved me—I knew it so well!—and Dad was so anxious for me to marry Ben. There wasn't anybody else, not then, and when I found out I didn't love him as I should, I—well, there's such a thing as loyalty, you know, and I'd given my promise. What could I do?"

"You mean you—me—you—" I stammered.

She nodded. "I think I loved you right from the start, but I couldn't let you know. I felt so—guilty!"

"You—love—me?" I muttered, unbelieving.

"Only you," Glennis said. "During these last few days I've realized how

much. And I've come to know you, as well as to love you, Swanee. You're just a lonely, unhappy boy. You're no killer. If you were you wouldn't have risked your life against Desbros and Flowers. You'd have taken the easy way, and killed Ben. And, Swanee, I didn't even dare let you know I loved you. I was afraid you would think—well, there *had* been Ben and—and—"

"Glennis," I said, and it was all I *could* say. "Glennis."

Tears were brimming in her eyes now. "I could see how much you loved me, though, and how it hurt you because I was miserable. For even though my heart told me I loved you, I tried not to believe it. There were all those stories about you, and I knew you had been hired to kill Ben. Then I began to realize the kind of life you had been forced to live, and how little choice you had sometimes. And I came to understand you, Swanee. I'll never leave you. I'm your wife and you can't drive me away. I'm going to be with you always, Swanee."

Then she was in my arms and the pain in my chest didn't matter any more. Somehow I knew I was going to get well. I buried my face in Glennis' hair and whispered her name and knew at last that she was really mine.

WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range Oddities

By HAROLD HELFER

O. E. Shadel was marshal at Morrill, Kans., for 44 years and never carried a gun.

A meeting of Woods County, Okla., farmers and ranchers to discuss details of a rain-making project was postponed. The reason—the weather bureau predicted rain for the time of the meeting.

For more than 15 years, on the 3900 block of Jefferson Avenue, El Paso, all the births occurred on one side of the street, all the deaths on the other.

Salt Lake in Utah is the saltiest body of water in the world.

One of the greatest natural amphitheaters in the world is the Park of the Red Rocks in the hills west of Denver—it can seat more than 10,000 people.

Thousands of people pour into Carlsbad, New Mexico, every year to see the Southwest's most magnificent caverns. The other day someone asked the guides what question was asked most by the tourists. It was: "Where are the rest rooms?"

Coal deposits up to one billion tons have been located in the San Juan basin of Colorado and New Mexico.

The following ad—shades of BUFFALO BILL!—appeared in a Phoenix paper: "Cowboy wanted for dude ranch. Must be able to play guitar and canasta. We'll teach you how to ride."

Pretty Laurie Anders isn't kidding when she chants "I like the wide open spaces" on Ken Murray's show. Laurie was riding horseback at the age of five on her father's ranch in Wyoming.

The nation's largest city park is the 14,000-acre one at Phoenix, Arizona.

You wouldn't think a Texan would steer away from a cow—but that's what ECA's Lester E. Blasche did in Rangoon, Burma. He was at the zoo when he suddenly became aware that a cow was charging in his direction. The Texan took one look at the snorting bovine and took off—but fast. Nearby Burmese chased the cow and caught it by its tail.

By TEX MUMFORD

You could have heard a baby-size pin drop

THE SAGA OF WISPY WILLIE

He was the whirling wiz of music—piano or gun!

THE fanciest gunman of them all? Billy The Kid? Wild Bill Hickok? Kit Carson? Buffalo Bill? Jesse James?

No, they didn't come close. It was a fellow by the name of—of all things—Willie Weinstein.

I'll admit right away he didn't look like much. It wasn't only that he was small and skinny and looked like a runt, but there was something very fluttery and unanchored about him. People just naturally started calling him Wispy Willie.

I was behind the counter polishing up some glasses when he came walking into The Lone Bar for the first time. I had to look twice before I could get a good

focus on him and then I said, "What's your pleasure, stranger?"

"Lemonade," he said.

I got strong nerves, but the glass in my hand almost went skittering away from me. Seeing the strange look on my face, he said, "All right, so if you don't have lemonade give me something else. Sarsaparilla will do. I'm thirsty. Been walking all the way from Pecos."

"Pecos!" I exclaimed. "Why, stranger, that's two hundred miles away!"

"I will make a wager with you, my friend," said this character, brushing off some dust from his clothes, "that it's nearer two thousand. But, if you don't have enough money for the stagecoach, the only way to get from one place to another is to keep putting one foot in front of the other. At least, that is what we have found in Brooklyn. By the way, how far is it to San Francisco?"

"You mean you're walking from Brooklyn to Frisco?" I gasped.

"No, not quite. I got stranded in Pecos. Stranded is a fancy word meaning that you are busted financially. But I got a nice job in San Francisco waiting for me, so I decided the only logical thing is to start moving in that direction."

Well, he didn't look like an oyster bed pirate, a claim jumper or a card sharpie, to me, and, as those were the only jobs I ever heard tell about San Francisco, I asked what kind of work he did. He then he told me his name was Willie Weinstein, that in Brooklyn everyone seemed to think he was pretty fair shakes as a musician and that he was on his way to play with a new symphony orchestra, which they were starting up in San Francisco. As he was talking an idea struck me.

"Do you play the piano by any chance?" I asked.

"By chance, or by design," said Willie Weinstein, "that is what I am—a pianist."

"Well, I was thinking," I said. "This place could use a piano player. We haven't been so lucky with our piano players lately."

His eyes blazed. "Why, I could work here until I get up enough transportation money to San Francisco!" he exclaimed.

SUDDENLY his face clouded up somewhat and he said, "What did you mean when you said your piano players hadn't been so 'lucky?'"

"Oh," I said, "just different odd little things. The last piano player really brought it on himself, though. He'd always get off key playing 'Sweet Genevieve.' Well, that happened to be a favorite number of one of the customers and finally this customer couldn't stand it any longer and one night last week he pulled out his six-shooter and let that ivory pusher have it right in the midst of his sour note."

"With the others," I went on, "it's been mostly Rusty Joe. To tell the truth, I just don't believe Rusty Joe cares much for music. Some piano player would be spanking the keys along and all of a sudden Rusty Joe would whip out his forty-five and start blazing away. Luckily, Rusty Joe, being the good shot that he is, the piano didn't get scarred up very much. Howsomever, you won't have to worry about Rusty Joe. He's in jail."

The character from Brooklyn seemed to be doing a heap of meditating and was rubbing his wispy chin. Shaking his head somewhat dolefully, he said, "I don't know—"

It was just then that Addie Mae came strolling into the place. She gave Willie Weinstein the eye and said, "Why, hello there, Big Boy!"

Willie stared at her. I guess it was because, in the first place, Addie Mae was naturally an uncommonly well-put-together wench. In the second place, nobody probably had referred to Willie Weinstein in that way before.

Of course, Addie Mae, being just naturally a very friendly personality, called everybody Big Boy, but Willie Weinstein didn't know that. I said, "Mr. Weinstein, I want you to meet Addie Mae. Addie Mae sings here—that is, when

there happens to be a piano player available."

Still gaping away at Addie Mae, Willie Weinstein of Brooklyn finally spoke up and said: "This place now has a piano player."

And some piano player he was too. He could dish out that real fancy high class music that doesn't sound like music, as well as the popular songs. Why, when he got through playing songs like "Old Black Joe" and "Carry Me Back To Ole Virginny," the boys at the bar sometimes had to throw away their whisky and beer, it would get so watered down from their tears.

As for Addie Mae, she never had been in better voice, as they say. One reason was she never had a better piano player. If her voice got a little trilly or off key, as it was apt to do every now and then, why Wispy Willie would bang down with some loud chords on the piano, real artistic like. Then there was another reason for Addie Mae's vocal improvement, a reason which made no sense whatsoever when you first thought about it: Addie Mae was getting swoony over Wispy Willie.

It used to bother me—the look that would come into Addie Mae's eyes sometimes when she beheld Wispy Willie, a look that I couldn't imagine coming into any female of any description, considering the subject matter looked upon, let alone a handsome filly like Addie Mae. Then one day it came to me what it was: Wispy Willie's piano playing music was no doubt affecting her, especially since she was a singer and all that. And, besides, since she was Rusty Joe's girl, why everybody just naturally kept hands off her. And a girl just naturally gets a hankering for a man, any kind of man. Wispy Willie at least didn't treat her as if she had the bubonic plague, with the seven years' itch as complications.

It was a little conversation that happened early one morning after closing time that really threw Addie Mae in Wispy Willie's camp. We were all standing around the bar, wetting our whistles some. Ale always did seem to get Addie Mae on the mellow side and with eyes becoming as mushy as half-done scrambled eggs, she gazed upon Wispy Willie and said, "You know, Willie—I mean if it wasn't for Rusty Joe—"

A spray of sarsaparilla geysered out of Wispy Willie's glass.

"You mean—you're—Rusty Joe's girl, Addie—"

He sounded like he was half way to Frisco. "Look, Willie," I hurried up and said to the best piano thumper The Lone Bar ever had, "Rusty Joe is in prison—for life."

THE color slowly returned to Wispy Willie's face. "You're sure—he's in prison for forever?"

"Positive," I said.

"Forever and ever?"

"That's right," I said. "He shot up four or five fellows at a poker game. The governor might not have minded that so much, but Rusty Joe shot up the three posses that went after him. In one of those posses was a cousin of the governor's. If the jury hadn't been so scared of Rusty Joe, they'd probably have voted to have him hung. The governor had to settle for a life sentence, though—he couldn't find twelve other men who could get up enough nerve to try Rusty Joe."

"If Rusty Joe's in a cell for keeps," Wispy Willie asked, "then how come do people around here still tremble when somebody just begins to sound his name."

"As to that," I answered, "all I can say is that Rusty Joe has always been an ornery cuss."

"The jail he's in—is it a good one?"

"It's at the county seat. Made out of solid cement. No one's ever broken out of it."

Wispy Willie was very silent for about a minute. Then he said, "You know something? I never could understand what everyone around here was always so all-fired cowed by this Rusty Joe."

Both me and Addie Mae just stared at him.

The piano player said, "He doesn't in-

timidate me any. Rusty Joe, Shmusty Joe. Who cares? They all look alike from the business end of a forty-five."

"But you ain't got a forty-five, Willie," I pointed out. "Or anything else of any other caliber, for that matter."

"Podner," said Wispy Willie, "I don't appreciate people what get technical with me. Caliber, shmaliber. So I'll go out and buy me a forty-five. Or something with some percentage point to it. First thing tomorrow."

Then, with a great big sweep of his hand, Wispy Willie knocked over his sarsaparilla. "And another thing," he said. "This stuff is too weak. From now on make mine beer—straight."

Addie Mae, her eyes lit up like a couple of dime-store Christmas trees, just said one word: "Willie!"

Sure enough, the next day Wispy Willie showed up with a holster around his waist and a shiny new gun butt sticking out the holster. Being the weight that he was, this caused him to list a little in the direction of his holster, but Wispy Willie didn't seem to mind. His piano playing got louder and better than ever and the look between him and Addie Mae got cozier and cozier.

One day Wispy Willie got a letter. It was from the prison and said:

I hear tell that you have been making eyes at my gal Addie Mae. Also that you been using my name in vain. Both of these things are bad. There could hardly be anything worser. I am giving you exactly 15 minutes to get out of town.

Rusty Joe

Addie Mae frowned as she looked at the letter and I guess my face got wrinked up some too, but Wispy Willie just whipped out a piece of paper and a pencil and wrote:

Dear Rusty Joe:
Shut up and drop dead.

Willie Weinstein

"Willie," murmured Addie Mae, her eyes getting all filled up like she was getting ready to bawl, "you're—you're just wonderful!"

It was the very next day that I heard that peculiar shuffling-like noise coming from the room up above the bar. From then on I kept hearing it day in and day out, night in and night out, whenever Wispy Willie wasn't at the piano. Inasmuch as it was Wispy Willie's room, my curiosity finally got the best of me and one day I asked him what was going on.

"Practising," he replied.

"Practising," I said, astonished. "But you don't have a piano in your room!"

"Practising my draw," he said, giving me a look as if I must be a pretty ignorant fellow.

Then he whipped out his gun.

I WAS now out and out bamfoozled. He was pretty good! I mean he got that gun out of the holster in pronto fashion.

Then, putting the gun back into his holster with a real snappy motion, he said, "Draw me a mug and don't spare the suds."

Hardly a week would go by but what Wispy Willie would get a letter from the county seat jail and they kept getting more and more threatening. Wispy Willie's answers were always short and to the point, like "Look whose talking!" or "You and who else?" When one week went by and the piano player didn't get a letter, he wrote Rusty Joe anyway, saying, "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?"

I kept hearing Wispy Willie moving around all the time in his room upstairs, so I knew that he was practising his draw right along.

Then one day, out of a clear blue sky, the local paper, *The Bullet-In,* came out with this headline: RUSTY JOE TO BE FREED. WILL BE RELEASED IN TWO WEEKS. ERROR FOUND IN COURT CONVICTION BY LOOPHOLE EDDIE, THE LAWYER.

The quick shuffling-like noises above me got even more regular and furious than before.

While this Willie Weinstein from Brooklyn had turned out to be an A-Number-One amazing character, I was still, to tell the truth, quite surprised to find him sticking it out like this. As for Addie Mae, she looked upon the piano player now as if he were a cross between

one of those bathtowel-draped Greek gods, with those fancy sandals, and Daniel Boone.

But as the time for Rusty Joe's release got closer and closer, I noticed that every once in a while Wispy Willie seemed to hit a false note on the piano.

Then bright and early one Tuesday—the morning of the very day that Rusty Joe was getting out, as it so happened—I was behind the bar washing out some glasses when I heard somebody coming down the steps and it was Wispy Willie and he had a suitcase in his hand. When he got to the bar, I asked, "Going somewhere?"

"Well, I tell you," said Wispy Willie. "I never did like playing the piano in October. The air seems to effect the piano wood."

"Of course," I said, "there's no reason why you shouldn't go whenever you want to, Willie—whatever the reason might be."

Just then, the front door swung open and a voice said, "Mac, I was wondering if you'd advance me twenty-five dollars."

Then the voice, which belonged to Addie Mae, suddenly stopped dead. She was taking in Wispy Willie, her eyes focusing on the suitcase.

"I was going to say that I thought it might be a nice idea if I surprised Willie by buying a couple of rings, one for him and one for me, making us sort of engaged," she said. "But never mind now!"

Wispy Willie just stood there for about a minute without saying anything. Then he spoke up: "What do you two have to stare so at a guy for, just because he's taking a suitcase full of laundry down to the Chinaman's to get washed. If it upsets you so, I'll just postpone the trip until tomorrow or the next day."

Then he turned around and, kind of heavily, I thought, walked up the stairs, suitcase in hand.

Well, there was an excitement in the air that the town never had had before, even though it was here that Wyatt Earp and Tulip-Nose Hopper had it out and where Bob Ford hid out for awhile and where the Dalton gang used to hang out sometimes between calls on train conductors. Every time the door would swing open, every eye in The Lone Bar, which had become crowded to the threshold, would take a sharp turn to the front. School was recessed for the day and *The Bullet-In* press was all greased up and ready to go for a big special extra.

As for Wispy Willie he went about his business in The Lone Bar, whistling as if there was nothing on his mind. But you couldn't help but notice that there was. For one thing, he'd never whistled before. Then there was the fact that he'd start up playing a number that sounded like "Camptown Races" and finished up playing something that reminded you of "That Dear Old Mother Of Mine." Then sometimes, right in the middle of a piece, he would get up and walk over to the bar and get a mug of beer, take one short swallow and walk away, usually bumping into a post along the way. Once or twice he tripped and went headlong into the piano keyboard. He was just naturally such a good player that, out of pure instinct, as I guess you might say, he always struck a mighty pretty chord.

JUST then the door swung open—and there was Rusty Joe! His mustache was redder and wilder looking than ever and his eyes were meaner-looking, which hardly seemed possible. Without a word everybody slid out of their chairs and lined themselves as far back up against the wall as they could get.

Rusty Joe stood in the doorway for a moment without saying anything and then started moving slowly toward the bar. Wispy Willie kept on playing the piano, as if nothing very much out of the ordinary was happening, although it did seem to me that "The Merry Widow," which he was playing, was getting unmerrier by the note.

Rusty Joe, with a nasty-looking gun butt swishing at each side, got up even with the bar, then roared out in the direction of the piano, "Hey, you, come here."

The word "who?" came squeaking from Willie. Then "me?"

"I don't mean your grandma Josephine, smarty-boy!"

Every glass in the place seemed to rattle, with the windows furnishing an accompaniment. I saw Addie Mae, standing in a corner, bringing a hand to her mouth.

"Well, what are you waiting for, cutey-pants!" roared Rusty Joe. "COME HERE!"

Wispy Willie stood up. "Stranger, if a stranger comes in and says he wants to see someone," he said, "then this stranger comes over."

Seeming to droop even more than usual in the direction of his holster, he started over toward the bar, narrowly missing colliding with a post along the way.

Then they stood there, the two of them, facing each other, about twenty feet apart. You could have heard a pin, baby-size, drop.

Wispy Willie, forcing something that seemed like it might be trying to turn into a little smile, said, "Pleasant weather we've been having, eh, stranger?"

"I'm asking you to draw, lotsa-wind," rasped Rusty Joe. "Right here and now. It's me or you."

Then came to pass the thing that those of us saw that October evening that we'll never forget as long as we live, and maybe even longer. Wispy Willie drew. Then put his gun back in his holster again. Then drew it out again. Then put it back in his holster again.

—While Rusty Joe was still getting his gun out!

Now, as anybody can tell you, Rusty Joe was just as fast a man with a gun as either Jesse or Frank James, Wild Bill Hickok or Laramie Pete. But there he stood now, a gun in each hand just gaping, as if he couldn't believe what his eyes had seen.

Wispy Willie followed Rusty Joe's bewildered gaze, then exclaimed, "Whoops! I still have my gun in my holster, don't I? —Sorry, old timer!" Then, in what seemed like one motion, he whipped out his gun again, stirred his mug of beer on the bar with the muzzle, took a quick sip, then brought the gun back to his holster. Wispy Willie looked down and, his face coloring somewhat, he said, "Doggone, that gun's still in my holster, isn't it? Oh, well, I'll try again."

This time he brought the gun out, flipped it in an arc just to his rear, gave the butt, as it came down, a kick with the heel of his right foot, and then caught it as it came bouncing back up, the muzzle this time pointing right at Rusty Joe.

Rusty Joe's arm dropped limply to his side. He just stood there, looking all fizzed out and hapless, as if he'd aged twenty years in the last minute. His fingers went loose and both of the guns went crashing to the floor. Then he turned around and walked out.

TO TELL the truth, I don't know what happened to him. The last I heard was a report that he turned up as a preacher somewhere out in the Congo.

Wispy Willie and Addie Mae got married, real legally, and they have five or six front-yard kids.

Since everything happened such a long time ago I guess it won't hurt any now if I was to tell about a little conversation Wispy Willie and me had by ourselves at the bar after closing time that October day.

"Well, Willie," I said, "I seen most of 'em, just about everybody but Davey Crockett, I guess, but I'm here to tell you that display of gun skill you put on a few hours back was the greatest since firearms was first thought of. There ain't no doubt about it, Willie—you're far and away the greatest gunman of all times. Nothing less than that would have put the fear of God in a character like Rusty Joe."

"I appreciate all them kind words," said Wispy Willie, "and I reckon it's a good thing I was in such form too. Because, in all the excitement and one thing or another, I plumb forgot to put any bullets in the gun."

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A Nickel a Novel in FIVE WESTERN NOVELS—25c at All Stands!

By CIBOLO FORD

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BRIMSTONE on the BRAZOS

BILL BADGER was a cowman from the word go, straight as a string and proud of it. He'd ride a hundred miles to fight if anyone called him a liar.

One spring he was gathering strays for a trail drive down along the Brazos. He picked up a bunch in my mark, and sent word for me to meet him at the forks of the road two miles east of my ranch.

I was waiting in the shade of a mesquite clump when I heard the trail hands shouting and pretty soon they come 'round a bend in the chaparral, kicking up a cloud of dust.

In the lead, big head swinging close to the ground, long legs setting a pace that

Just as two fire-eaters stage their horrendous duel, she rushes to intervene—a succulent barbecue, still on the hoof!

kept the cowhands busy pushing on the drags, was a big brindle cow weighing around a thousand pounds. She had one horn twisted to point straight for the ground. Even a greenhorn couldn't mistake her, once he'd seen her. She belonged to a feller name of Fuller Millsap, who owned the next place to mine.

Millsap was a queer duck, always doing the odd thing. He'd started a place that was more like a farm than a cow ranch, but he sure knew beef. And he was so tight he squeaked when he walked. He watched every cow and every pound of beef on it like they were gold.

Him and Bill Badger married the Tibbet sisters from over on Dry Creek.

This here lead cow now, was one a pilgrim had sold to Millsap, and he'd never got around to changing the brand. Likely she'd drifted into Badger's herd when they come across the prairie, and he'd naturally thought she was a stray.

Bill was ridin' point and swung over to meet me. He was a proddy devil with a spiky black mustache and a fighting jaw. He carried two big guns, butts forward over his hips, and he had quite a reputation for pulling them at the drop of a hat. Folks run shy of getting him in a gunfight. Besides being cross-eyed he was mighty touchy about his honesty.

"Bill, you've got Millsap's cow," I said as we come together.

"Yeah?" he asked. "Which one?"

"That big brindle leader with the crooked horn."

"She's in that pilgrim's brand, ain't she?"

"Yeah, but he sold her to Millsap before he left the country."

"How in hell should I know that? Why don't the fool brand his cows when he buys them? Is he so close he's scared of wearing out his running iron?"

OF COURSE I didn't want to take sides, so I just shrugged.

"I wouldn't wonder. But if that gent finds out you picked her up, he'll be on your tail with war in his whiskers, even if he is your brother-in-law. You wouldn't be the first man he's killed. I hear he's got two dead men to his credit now."

"Well, I'll turn her loose and he can come get her. I can't spare the cowhands to send her back."

"I'm holding some cattle to drive his way down in the draw about half a mile beyond here," I said. "Take her along and drop her there. I'll drive her back with the rest."

We had just cut out my strays when, out of the timber comes a man on a big Missouri mule so old his bones rattled. It was Fuller Millsap, and his clodhopper boots was beating the sides of the mule like a drummer boy going to war.

He headed straight for Bill Badger and pulled up in a cloud of dust. His patched pants was halfway to his knees, and his hickory shirt was hanging out. His blue eyes was shooting sparks when he shouted:

"I trailed her. I seen where you picked her up, and I trailed her. May the Lord have mercy on your soul, Bill Badger. Stealing a cow from your own brother-in-law."

Bill Badger stared from his crossed eyes in the general direction of his het-up relation. He spat out a stream of tobacco juice.

"You accusing me of stealing?" he rumbled.

Millsap was a religious cuss, moral as a minister, but how he loved a fight.

"Why, you polecat, you!" he said. "That's my brindle cow you got there. You picked it up over on the prairie, not half a mile from my house. I seen her there this morning."

Bill Badger hitched up his gunbelt.

"Fuller, this ain't Arkansas. This is a man's country. Out here we don't go around calling thieves unless we got good proof. If you weren't too damn yellow to carry a gun, I'd learn you some manners."

"Thieves and killers! I swear, I never thought I'd marry into a family of them. That's my cow, Bill Badger, and you turn her over to me or I'll have the law on you. I'll law you from here to kingdom come, if you don't give up that cow."

Badger spat again. His black mustache spikes bristled like a tomcat's. Hell was beginning to fire in his criss-cross eyes, but he held his temper.

"That cow's in the pilgrim's brand, ain't it?" he asked.

"Sure it is. I bought her off of him."

"It's a wonder you wouldn't rebrand when you buy a cow. Go ahead and law. You got no proof that's your cow."

Of course, I knew this was Millsap's cow all right, and I knew that Badger knew it, but I wasn't saying nothing. I seen Bill was so mad at being called a cow thief by his brother-in-law he was going to hold the critter just to spite him.

To Fuller Millsap that cow was a thousand pounds of dollars and cents on the hoof, and money on the hoof was what that feller lived for. I could see him shiver up as he pictured that hideful of future greenbacks leaving him.

"Bill Badger, you low-down rattlecat," he shouted. "I can prove that's my cow. There's plenty who know it. And when I do prove it you'd better make yourself few and seldom in these parts. My wife'd feel bad if I had to hang her sister's husband."

BADGER put his hands on his gun butts, tried to focus his pigeon-toed eyes on the proddy bird from Arkansas.

"Fuller, I been known on this range all my life as an honest man," he said. "If you feel like staging any hanging you know where to find me. And you better come a-shooting. For the next time I see you I won't have no pity on your lack of gun-savvy. I'll drill you quick as I would a good man."

Millsap almost jumped out of his saddle.

"I swear I wished I had a gun along right now," he said. "I'd show you a thing or two."

"Try it, Fuller, try it. I'll give you the chance," answered Badger. "Come on, boys. Get this herd moving," he shouted to the trail hands. "We've wasted too much time on this fool hog caller."

He laid an angry rope end to the tails of the cows, and they were off, leaving the frustrated Millsap throwing fists after them from the back of his ancient mule.

I figured the two scrappy ranchers would cool down and make up somehow, so I forgot all about it till a week later. I was sitting on the porch, when I hear a noise like the Battle of Gettysburg. In a minute a carry-all come busting out of the woods with Millsap's old mule between the shafts.

I made out there was two women on the seat. Minnie Badger was driving, sitting up there big as a barn, and beside her rattling around like a mouse in a cage was her sister, little Carrie Millsap. How them two off-size females come to be sisters is beyond me, but stranger things has happened in the cow-country.

Minnie laid it into the mule plumb up to the front door.

"Ike, you got to stop it. You got to put a stop to it!" she shouted out of breath.

Carrie was crying, the tears streaming down her cheeks like a cloudburst. She must of been at it a long time for the floor of the rig was all wet. "You've got to help us, Ike," she sniffled, dabbing her eyes with a wet handkerchief.

"Light, ladies. You look plumb tuckered," I says. "I don't know what's the trouble, but it must be bad for you to be cutting up this way."

"It is, Ike. It is. We can't get out. We don't dare stop. We don't dare leave them alone. We got to get back before they kill each other."

"Kill each other? Who's going to kill who?" I asked.

"Our husbands," sniffed Carrie. "Oh, please stop them."

"Yes, our darn fool husbands," roars Minnie. "Why we ever married such a pair of wildcats is beyond me."

"Tell me about it," I said. "If there's anything I can do to help, I'll do it. You can count on me, so just calm down, and take it easy."

"Fuller come home in a rage the other day," said Carrie. "He claimed Bill stole his brindle cow. He's been making threats left and right till this morning, one of Bill's hands come over with a note saying if

Fuller didn't keep quiet he'd gun him. Fuller got his mad up, and sent a challenge back for Bill to fight him at sunup tomorrow at your cowcamp on the edge of Millsap Prairie."

"Bill took him up, Ike," put in Carrie. "They're all set to kill each other, and nothing we could say would stop them. Ike, can't you do something?"

"Neither one of them could hit a barn with a pistol if they was inside it," I told them.

"It's not pistols, Ike. Them two fools is going to fight with shotguns at thirty paces. There's no stopping them two when they get mad. They'll keep shooting till one of them's dead."

"I don't know as I can stop them, ladies, but I'll do my darnedest," I said. "Just you go home and try to keep calm, and we'll see what can be done."

NEXT morning before sunup I was at the line camp where they was to do their double murdering. It was just getting light when Fuller come up on his old mule, holding the shotgun across his saddle fork, calm as a cucumber on ice. He had his cowhand with him for a second.

"Still set on going through with it, Fuller?" I asks.

"Looks that way, don't it?" he said. "What are you doing out here?"

"I was in on the start of this ruckus, so I figured I might as well be in on the finish," I told him.

They hadn't been there but a few minutes when along come Badger, riding his best horse, and with his foreman to back him. Him and Millsap never spoke. They just sat their animals, paying no attention to each other or to me.

Their two men got together to talk out the details, while Badger pulled an eight-gauge scatter-gun from his saddle boot.

Millsap's second was to fire off his gun, and Badger's was to do the same to show they was ready. Then the fighters was to stand back to back, walk off thirty paces, turn, and fire till one of them fell or give up.

Them two hellions took their places a few yards out from the stable door. The second hesitated; Badger was still chewing. He drowned a fly that lit near his feet and bellowed:

"What in tarnation you waiting for?"

Millsap's man took a deep breath and pulled the trigger. Badger's man followed suit.

One, two, three, four, they paced off.

Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three. My heart was pounding so hard I thought it would shake down the stable. At twenty-nine I pulled out my handkerchief and wiped my forehead. At thirty, them two devils turned, fingers on triggers, and just as their shotguns blasted, the brindle cow with the crooked horn come charging out of the stable door. She went down in her tracks with a load of buckshot in each side.

My cowhand that I'd planted with the cow—which I'd stole the night before from Badger's herd—had done a good job. He'd sure been set to lambaste the creature when I pulled my handkerchief.

I started to tremble, and when I got strength enough to stand up, Millsap and Badger was staring at each other with mouths a mile wide. Both of them was white as ghosts. The shock had killed their mad.

"By God, Fuller, we damn near shot each other," said Bill without thinking.

"That's a fact," said Millsap, gasping.

Carrie and Minnie had come up in the carry-all, and was sitting in it.

"Well, you two boars best make up," I said. "The cow's dead and you got nothing to fight about."

"I reckon maybe I was a mite hasty," said Millsap, mopping his forehead.

"Let's forget it, Fuller," he said. "It didn't amount to a whistle in the wind."

"The cow don't need to be wasted, anyhow," said Minnie. "We'll have a barbecue, and invite all the neighbors to celebrate the end of this terrible feud."

At which suggestion, Fuller Millsap brightened up considerable.

"I swear. That'll be a good idea, Minnie," he said. "We'll charge them fifty cents apiece." • • •

Outside the window, Sheriff Porter swung around with his six-shooter

THE FINAL ROUNDUP

By WILLIAM HOPSON

BECAUSE of the long summer days, the sun didn't go down until about seven-thirty, and Ed Porter always waited until then to visit with his wife. He sat beside her now, on a folding camp chair, packing tobacco into a smelly pipe and tamping it down with a horny forefinger. The dirt on her grave was still comparatively fresh, the glazed tombstone a bright white shaft among the others in the small cemetery.

He said, "Yes, honey, I wish you could see the old town now. Not like it was when you left in the spring. Not quiet and lazy like it was all these years. That new oil pool they struck south of here last month—it's got the county clerk half crazy trying to run down titles for these

An Old-Time Lawman Is Suddenly Faced With Modern Mobsters!

money mad people hunting for leases."

He lit the pipe, puffed reflectively for a moment, and crossed the legs of his old style knee high boots. He said, "I wish you was here to tell me what to do about Homer, Matilda. When he was a tubby little tyke, you used to give him wild plum jam, but he's not like that now. He got back home again just six weeks ago, and I know very well he's back of all this liquor that's begun to flood the county. Yep, we voted dry on local option again, Matilda; just like always. The stiff still has to be hauled in a hundred and fifty miles from a wet county. But all he done was just grin over that big cigar and tell me if I'd sort of turn my face the other way. . . ."

He sat there talking to her, a very, very old man now, while the shadows faded and dusk began to move in. He knocked out the dottle from his pipe and rose and folded up the chair. He said, "I'd best be getting on back to the hotel, honey. Yep, I live there now. Rented our house today to get away by myself. I'll be back tomorrow night."

He left her there and made his way into a road between a line of stones and headboards to a battered coupe that was sixteen years old. It was in striking contrast to the sleek black car he saw parked in front of the local mercantile store as Ed Porter drove back to the frame hotel with the yellow paint peeling from its ancient board walls. He climbed the back stairs to his meagerly furnished room and took out his badge and old six-shooter, which he seldom wore any more. He slipped the ancient single-action inside his shirt front, left the shabby room where if a man couldn't forget he at least could remember the happiness of fifty years with one woman, and walked back to the darkened store.

THE car was still there and so was the man with the oversized fat neck, the huge shoulders, the flat-brim "Western" hat. Homer Ralson said, "Hello, Ed. Had an idea I'd be seeing you soon after you just drove by. Where were you—raiding some guy's house?"

"I'm just asking if you've got anything hidden away in that car," was the sharp reply.

Homer laughed and shoved an arm over the edge of the car window, flicking ashes from his cigar. His lazy eyes were playing on the old county sheriff's sun cracked lips and down to the old fashioned boots.

"Look, Ed," he told the sheriff a little impatiently, "You've got it into that old fool head of yours that I'm in the liquor racket to clean up during this coming boom. Well, I'm not. I'm a businessman. I represent a big syndicate from back East interested in oil leases. You play along with me and you won't have any worries. Things have changed, Ed."

"I expect that they have," was the dry comment. "Some people anyhow, when the son of as fine a cowman as I ever knew in the old days is gone for years and years and then ends up back here selling liquor in a dry county. I've nothing against the stuff, Homer, if it's legal in a wet county. This one happens to be dry. You ought to know you can't bribe me and that even if you could the Federal men will get you sooner or later. Just some advice to the son of a man I knew long before you were born, Homer. Keep your liquor out of this county."

Homer Ralson opened the door and got heavily out of the car; soft, oily skinned, overdressed. The impatience in his face had given way to the first stages of anger. It was in his voice when he spoke. "You get eighteen hundred a year for sweating your guts out in this country as a jackleg county sheriff, riding around in a broken down car ready to fall apart. You can have a new one any time you say the word."

"That's the second time, Homer," Porter warned coldly. "Pankersley only tried it once and he got himself cured in a hurry. You try it again and you get the same treatment."

Homer dropped the cigar stub, removed a fresh panatella from inside his brown summer coat, and bit off the end. He was smiling a twisted mouthed smile. "That proves what I told you two weeks ago.

He's your boy, not me. I told you I'm big business. Leases. I leave the punks like him to pick up the peanuts and buck the Feds."

Porter said mildly, "Have it your own way, Homer. But I do get around. Strange trucks having nothing to do with oil or cattle feeding and hauling running the roads nights since this boom broke open. I got one of them up on Gyp Creek but it was empty except for the smell from a broken bottle. One of Pankersley's boys. I know that last week over in another county you and him almost had a fight. There were threats from both sides. So this is a final warning, Homer: if you and him get into it over something going on in this county there'll be three of us in it and you two are going to lose."

He left Homer standing there with the new cigar half way to his purplish lips and strode on. It was dark now and the drug store lights were on across the square. Ed Porter went in and sat down at the old fashioned, marble top fountain to have his evening cup of coffee. Outside a truck braked to a stop, the lights faded as the driver switched them off, and the man himself, strong and tough looking, came in. He saw the sheriff alone at the deserted fountain and grinned.

"So we meet again?" he said.

Ed Porter said, "Where's your boss, sonny?"

"Pankersley? I thought he'd seen you by now, Sheriff. He was pretty sore about you stopping me the other night when I went up to Gyp Creek after that load of cattle. I'm taking another back to Big Springs tonight."

Yes, Ed Porter thought grimly, and probably bringing back a load of liquor in that same truck tomorrow night.

He finished the luke-warm coffee in three gulps, went out and saw Homer looking over the Pankersley truck, a hard scowl on his face. Another man in dirty crimped hat sat in the cab of the truck, waiting for the driver. This was Bert Bagler who, sixteen years before, had done one year and one day in a Federal jail after Porter had located the man's illicit moonshine still. Pankersley, buying cattle as a probable screen to cover his liquor activities, was paying Bagler to hold the stuff on his lone section of land until the truck came for them.

Ed Porter turned on a heel and made his way back along the broken concrete of the ancient sidewalk and entered the hotel lobby past the various strangers who now jammed it every night—lease hungry men with money and sharp eyes. In the shabby room where he now lived out his loneliness with a picture of his wife on the dresser, he picked up his old .30-30 repeater in its worn scabbard and spoke to his wife as he always did when entering or leaving.

"I'll be back as soon as I can make it, hon. Maybe this job will soon be too big for just a jackleg sheriff who don't even have a radio in his car. But Homer is mixed up in something I don't like the looks of so I think I'll scout around a little bit. So don't worry if I'm a little late."

He added, "I know you always said that but you do worry, don't you?"

Carrying the repeater and scabbard, he made his way along the creaky floored, dimly lit upper hallway to the back door and descended the back outside stairs to the rattle-trap car parked under a China Berry tree. He slid in beneath the wheel onto seat springs mostly without covering and pushed the scabbard down alongside his left leg. It had been years since he'd found it necessary to use a horse but, as of old, the gun still rode beside his leg.

Out on the paved county road beyond the dry square citizens referred to as a park, he rattled the car northward, the wind cool now and good to his face. He was remembering the time—let's see, back in 'Ninety-eight. That would be fifty-three years ago. Yes, fifty-three years ago since the night he'd come along this same road, a fifteen-year-old hand wrangling horses on his first cattle drive. Only there hadn't been any road then—just a wilderness cattle trail. The fields of cotton and combine feed now on either side pasture land had been covered with mesquites, chaparral bushes, some shinnery in the sandy

spots, and a little wild rye in the lower places.

Five miles north of town the dark oil pavement of the highway forked sharply. One turned east toward the line of the next county—the same line to which he intended to escort Homer Ralson if Homer ever tried to bribe him again. The other fork continued north. He remembered now that it had been about here that they had swung the herd north on the memorable drive of fifty-three years ago.

LIGHTS flared out of the night near the fork and Ed Porter let the battered coupe roll in beside the gasoline pumps of a modest service station. A young fellow in overalls came limping out, the sole of his left shoe almost four inches in height. "Hello, Gramp," he greeted. "Want some gas?"

"Might as well, Nonnie," Porter said to his grandson.

Nonnie slipped a hose muzzle from its place on a pump and inserted the metal pipe into the tank pipe. The pump, however, hardly had started to hum before there came a splash and the acrid odor of spilled gasoline. Nonnie replaced the hose and limped over, his young eyes suspicious.

"Wise guy, huh?" he demanded. "All right, I'll be right with you, Gramp."

"You call me that again and I'll crawl out of this car and bust you like I used to when I had to help raise you."

"Hell of a fine nurse *you* were!" jeered his grandson with utter disregard of respect for an elder. "Wait'll I close up."

"I didn't say I was going any place," Ed Porter almost roared at his grandson.

"Then you ought to have taken off that badge before you drove in here," came the retort.

Nonnie Porter quickly locked his pumps and then the front door of the station from the inside. The lights flicked out into utter darkness all around them and presently he came into view from his modest living quarters in the rear.

"What's that thing you got with you?"

[*Turn page*]

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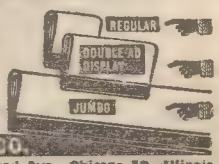

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the sheriff demanded almost testily as the right hand door of the coupe opened.

"That, Gramp," Nonnie said softly, working in beside his grandfather, "is a Jap Arisaki rifle whose former owner hasn't needed it for six years now. It'll outshoot that relic you're carrying."

Ed started the motor and said, "It'll blow up in your face some day because the high chamber pressure of American ammunition is too much for cheap steel. Throw the damned thing out the window before I get hurt."

He was pulling out on the highway now, slowly, waiting. "Well?" he finally demanded. "Don't sit there like a burro."

Nonnie chuckled at his grandfather. "I was getting ready to call you on the phone, Gramp. I just got a glimpse when he took the north fork, but it was Homer all right. Looked like about four men with him in that big road burner. What do you suppose he's really been up to since he got back after all these years?"

Ed Porter had shifted into high gear now, the yellow headlights playing far out ahead on the pavement. The north fork.

He said, "I've been wondering about that myself, son."

"Fourteen dollars is a pretty good price to pay for a fifth of stuff that costs four and a half at places where sale is legal. A man with a big cache of it ready could really clean up when this boom gets under way."

"Not when they know I'd clean them out fast, son. If I could find out what Homer and that fellow Pankersley quarrelled about—"

He left the rest of it unsaid. The old car that Nonnie kept tuned to a hairline was running with surprising smoothness under the rattling hood. Nonnie seemed to read the thought that had been in Ed Porter's mind for quite some time now. He expressed it in a soft voice.

"It's still a lot of profit, Gramp—enough that they wouldn't let you stand in the way. A year ago there were two thousand people in this county. A month from now there'll be ten thousand. They'll stop you, Gramp. You won't have a chance."

Ed Porter didn't answer his grandson. For some strange reason he was thinking of that old trail drive of more than a half century ago. An unsurfaced county lane cut into the highway and he swung into it and eased on the brakes.

Nonnie said, "Now what?"

"Just thinkin' about one night around fifty years ago when we went through here with a herd."

Nonnie snorted as his grandfather got out, demanding to know if he was looking for cow tracks. "We've had quite a few rains since then, Gramp. They're probably all washed out by now."

The sheriff came back and slid beneath the wheel again. He said, "Can't tell for sure about tracks. Too many truck and tractor tire marks. Let's take a look on up the lane anyhow."

They drove on for four miles, crossed a loose boarded wooden bridge over a dry creek bed and then made a slow climb as the road curved around the corner of a knoll. In the distance a few scattered lights proclaimed the little farming and ranching district of Gyp Creek, named after the gypsum rock formations that made all water except cistern water unfit for anything but stock.

ED PORTER promptly shut off his headlights and eased on at a slow pace.

He said to Nonnie, "This used to be headquarters of the old Hart Ranch, son. Sure, I know you know that. But what I never told you was that I took my first job wrangling right here when I was fifteen. See that red sandstone building where the store is? Just three years later, when Matilda and me was both eighteen, we was married in the front part that used to be the living room. Fifty years ago this month."

Nonnie Porter didn't answer that one. He knew of those almost daily trips in the evening to the graveyard, of the big photo on the dresser in the hotel room and how his grandfather talked to it. Ed Porter was living in the past of fifty years ago.

They got through unnoticed except for

a couple of barking dogs, and went on down the lane for another mile. Here the sheriff abruptly pulled up at a sagging wooden gate. Nonnie shifted the Arisaki out of the way and opened the car door to get out. He was grinning in the darkness.

"I'm just now beginning to get it, Gramp," he chuckled. "Sly old coyote, you are, huh? Got it all figured out that Pankersley runs a load of cattle into Big Springs and brings back a load of booze to cache at Bert Bagler's place until the boom is on, huh? Bert was the boy whose moonshine still you raided years ago. You know he's in town because I saw the empty truck pass by earlier today. So while he's gone, we'll go out and look for Pankersley's cache, huh?"

"Cut out the talking and open that gate," his grandfather ordered gruffly and then pushed down on the clutch and shifted from neutral into low gear.

He eased through with the lights still off and Nonnie closed the gate and joined him. Three hundred yards farther on Ed Porter suddenly swung the slowly creeping car off the rutted road and in back of a mesquite motte, for there was no mistaking the light winking in the distance. Nonnie Porter's chuckle came again and his grandfather let out a half grunt as he switched off the motor.

Nonnie said, "Bert must have taken the cut-off across Duck Creek. I heard they were going to load cattle tonight. But we can prowl while they're away from the house."

"We can prowl right now," Ed Porter answered and unlimbered himself out of the seat. He slid the old .30-30 from the scabbard and straightened. "I want to see who's in that house, so tag along and don't make any noise."

"Noise, he says," snorted Nonnie Porter. "Me, the guy who crawled into Jap foxholes nights when you couldn't see to spit. Noise, he says!"

For a quarter of a mile they made their way forward over the sandy terrain, moving from one brush clump to another; hoping that Bagler didn't have any bull-

[*Turn page*]

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lunged hounds around the place. There was no sign of the big truck Ed Porter had seen in town, but there was no mistaking the outlines of two big automobiles, one of them Homer's beyond any doubt.

That second car either had been there all day or it had taken the rough cut-off road across Duck Creek. Nonnie's voice said, "That's Pankersley's car, Gramp. This looks like something big."

"Maybe a little too big, son. I wish I hadn't brought you along. I checked with Washington on Pankersley. He's got a gangster record a mile and twenty years long. He's connected with a big mob outfit in New Jersey."

"So that's it? I've been reading about these mobs going legit and putting their millions into business. It's all clear now. Homer comes out here representing a syndicate to buy up oil leases because he was born here and knows all the old-timers. So what happens? Pankersley's mob moves in on a muscling job to take over, and of course they couldn't resist the temptation to grab off some extra dough by taking over all the liquor peddling, probably from their own companies. Jeez, Gramp, no wonder the Senate had to move in on them. Strange part of it, too, is that we small town guys still don't realize how serious things are until they wind up doing business in our own backyards."

Ed Porter said grimly, "You circle to the other side of the house. When you hear me move in and throw down on the whole bunch come in the back way. Just let me find one quart of liquor in that house and this county won't be bothered with them all for sixty days anyhow."

NONNIE moved off into the darkness, surprisingly quiet and rapidly for a man with four inches of thigh-bone gone, taken out by a mortar fragment. The sheriff crept in closer, using the two cars as cover against the lights shining through the two dingy front windows. At one end of the sagging, half rotted porch he placed a booted foot on it for creaks and then peered through the window. And what he saw made him catch his breath.

Homer Ralson stood at one side of the room, a long panatella cigar half way to his purplish lips. Beside him were three men Ed Porter had never seen before—swarthy faced, sleek haired, flashily dressed. Guns with snub barrels gleamed in their carefully manicured hands. They were covering Pankersley, a thin, poised, graying man of possibly fifty; him and Bert Bagler. The truck driver, that Bagler had been with in town, wasn't there.

Through a broken window pane came Homer's voice. He was saying almost lazily, "You should have known that you couldn't get away with it, mister. I warned you flatly when we had that fuss the other day that the Jersey mob wouldn't be allowed to operate because we got here first. We had everything ready to set up and one of the boys here waiting for the go ahead from me to knock off Ed Porter after he wouldn't play ball with us. But you were the wise guy. You took one of your trucks and hi-jacked all of our equipment—four tons of dice and roulette tables and slot machines."

Pankersley shifted his weight, showing none of the fear that was stark and plain in Bert Bagler's darting eyes. Nor was there fear in the Eastern mobster's voice.

"You'd better get some sense, buster," he said quietly. "You know very well that mobs don't settle things like this any more. It goes to the big boys over a conference table. I got the go-ahead from the boss of our outfit to move in here and hold on because we've got more influence with the syndicate than that two-bit mob of yours. We've already been as good as allotted this new oil boom territory by the big boys, and that's final. You know the rules as well as I do, buster. No gang fights these days. You'd better use what few brains you've got to realize what'll happen to any members of any of the mobs pulling what you think you're going to try."

Pankersley shifted his body again and Ed Porter saw what was coming. His old six-shooter was lifted and the words already in his throat when there came a

[*Turn page*]

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startled oath from the kitchen followed by an order. Every man in the room swung around as the missing truck driver, a pistol in one hand and an Arasaki rifle in the other, half pushed Nonnie Porter into the room. Another oath broke from him at the order to drop both weapons.

"Say, what is this anyhow?" he demanded. "I go out back with the cramps and find this guy at the back door with a gun. I get back in here and—"

"It's the well known double-X, Fennie," Pankersley cut in. "The kind you boys out West haven't been used to yet. Ralson called me all the way over from the other county to talk this thing over. I was certain no man would be fool enough to do what he intends to and left my boys to come alone. Some of the more ratty mobs still have to learn the hard way."

Homer said, "What the devil are you doing out here anyhow, Nonnie?"

"Hunting for some ripe hackberries," Nonnie replied nonchalantly. "They ought to be good about this time of the year."

"Ed! Ed Porter!" Homer suddenly bawled. "Wherever you are, drop that gun and come in here or Nonnie gets it."

Two of the gunmen already were shooting and, outside the window, Ed Porter did not hesitate. The old six-shooter in his gnarled right hand went off like a cannon shot and the smoky lamp on a table disappeared. Porter had time to hope that Nonnie's years in the jungles with the Marines would cause him to act instinctively. That was all he had time to think of for flame flashes from Pankersley's hidden gun began to light up the room. It became a bedlam of hoarse yells, curses, and a scream from Bert Bagler—a scream of sheer terror. Porter made a lunge for the front door and flung it open. A body slid out past him and the gun was raised high for a blow when Nonnie's voice said calmly, "I'll go around out back and haul in Bert. Nice going, Gramp."

As suddenly as it had begun the firing ceased. It grew ominously quiet in there except for the labored breathing of two men. That and the sound of a body threshing around on the floor.

"Freeze and drop them guns!" Porter ordered. "I'll shoot the first man who moves."

"I haven't got a gun, Ed," came Homer's hoarse voice. "I think they're all down."

Porter risked a light, the match flaring with a crackling snap as it was rasped along the doorjamb. Then a cigarette lighter too flared in Homer's shaking hand and the old sheriff stared about him. Pankersley was dead, a wicked looking automatic pistol, now empty, still clutched in one hand. The truck driver's association with the mobster had cost him his life, too. One of the three gunmen was stone dead. The other two were badly wounded.

"I don't see how they missed you, Homer," Ed Porter said mildly. "For a big man you must have done some tall ducking."

He stepped over the bodies, his gun still covering Homer, and in the doorway leading to the trash littered kitchen he struck another match. He said, "Don't try anything, Homer," and disappeared, returning quickly with another lamp.

Presently Nonnie came back, a short length of mesquite wood in one hand, following a shambling Bert Bagler. He said with a grin, "I couldn't catch him with this bum leg, Gramp, but you should have seen him do a somersault when I threw this chunk of mesquite at the back of his noggin. Nice cleanup job here."

"Stop talking so much and go get them two pairs of handcuffs out of my car," his grandfather ordered. "I think they're under the seat or somewhere, leastwise I saw them there a few months ago. Hurry it up so that I can get out of here and call the district attorney."

Homer had bent and picked up his fallen cigar. His hand was trembling now. He said angrily, "You shot out that light to get us started at each other. You knew that any survivors would be charged with murder, Ed. You ought to have your crazy old head shot off!"

"From what I overheard," came the reply, "that's about what might have happened to me. Danged wonder I didn't

[*Turn page*]

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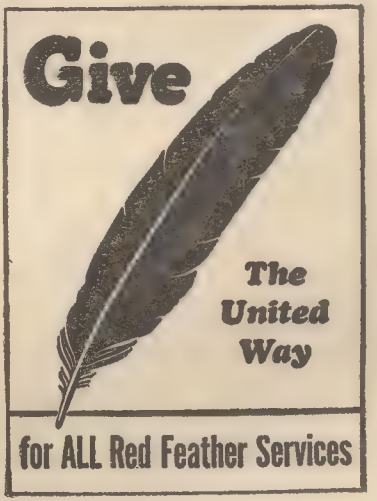

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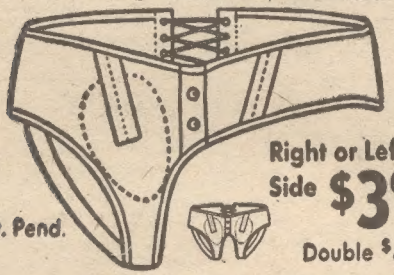

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miss that lamp. I ain't shot this old gun of mine in several years now."

"Now, look, Ed—" Homer began.

"Save it, son," Ed Porter cut in not unkindly. "When a man dances, he's got to pay the fiddler. That goes for you too, Bert. When I saw you in the truck in town tonight, I figured to come up while you were gone and find a barn full of liquor. I guess it's gambling stuff instead."

Bagler nodded mutely, his eyes on a man who had just died on the floor. Ed Porter guessed that Nonnie knew enough about wounds to take care of the third one. He had been assured of it a bit later as he drove away from Bagler's place.

Beside him, handcuffed to a door, Homer Ralson stared moodily out into the night, watching the flickering lights as the car bumped along the rutted lane. The spectre of the electric chair in Huntsville was before his eyes.

He said, "Well, I guess none of us would have thought twenty or so years ago that things would end up like this, Ed. Like you say, a man has to pay the fiddler, and I learned enough in fifteen years with the mobs how the tune goes. And I'm glad that Dad is not around. By the way, Ed, when was it that you first met him?"

"Old Jim? Why, it was fifty-three years ago, Homer, when we hooked on with the old Hart outfit. See that old stone store over there?"

"I remember it was the ranch headquarters."

"Yep," Ed Porter said, tooling the car slowly along the ruts as they passed through the settlement. "It was right here that we made our first roundup together. And, like you, son, I'm glad old Jim wasn't around when I've made the final one."

They bumped along in silence. In town Ed Porter locked up his prisoner and called the district attorney. Then, on the way back, he drove out of town to the small cemetery. He thought his wife would like to know that he was growing kind of tired and that the big job ahead needed a man who was young and up-to-date enough to handle one of those two-way car radios. • • •

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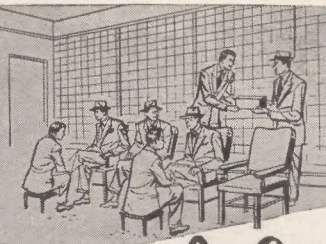

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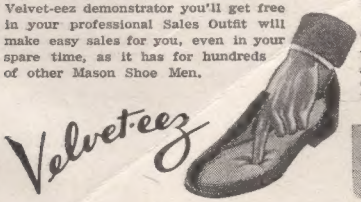

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